



# Résonance

Volume 2  
(2020)

publié par ses rédacteurs à Orono, Maine sous l'égide des Programmes  
Franco-Américains de l'Université du Maine

published by its Editorial Board in Orono, Maine, under the aegis of the  
Franco American Programs of the University of Maine

2020

## Dedication to Murielle (Nadeau) Martin, April 2, 1933-November 3, 2019

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### Recommended Citation

Martin, Jane E. (2020) "Dedication to Murielle (Nadeau) Martin, April 2, 1933-November 3, 2019," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/2>

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By Jane E. Martin, *Résonance* Fiction Editor

January, 2020

My mother loved short stories and novels, and occasionally, if the selection was apt, poetry too. (I remember she found Mary Oliver’s “University Hospital, Boston” to be particularly moving just following my father’s death.) She also read at least two newspapers a day—one of these not long after she woke up, so that she could quickly pass the paper on to her little sister three houses down, my Aunt Lou—and was drawn to certain regular columnists (Norman Beaupré, for example, *Résonance* issue one contributor).

My mother was the perfect reader. Not so long ago, I lived with her for two years. I remember a certain week when she began a new novel: late morning, as I left to teach my class in Creative Writing at the University of Southern Maine, I found her with a blueberry muffin in her green recliner on the enclosed porch finishing one chapter. “See you later, Jane,” she said, a little less interested in me than usual. Later that afternoon, when I’d returned from Portland, she was in the living room in a wicker chair, blinds from her sliding door raised a bit so she could read her novel with the sun on her back. If I remember correctly, she did not miss her favorite show, that evening, *Wheel of Fortune*—our affections may rank themselves under pressure (which is why none of us, her five children, dared call our otherwise selfless mother between 7:00 and 7:30pm, when the show ran)—but by the time I came downstairs to visit her mid-evening, she was under her covers in bed, reading once more. I backed away without being detected, sensing that something powerful was happening. Yet by midnight, I was willing to rival any competitor for my mother’s attention. Neither one of us slept before at least 1:00 or 2:00am, and we typically chatted late at night, my mother in bed, me in a wooden chair in the corner of her bedroom. I came downstairs resolute, a touch indignant.

The book was closed on my mother’s stomach, and my mother lay there looking at nothing in particular. She was crying. “Mom?” I said quietly, a bit nervous. “Oh, Jane, the ending was *so* sad.” I remember sitting in her bedroom that night, discussing the book with the attention and earnestness a notable life occurrence deserves.

If my mother loved you, whether you were her child or a masterful book, you became her preoccupation. She would think of you over her morning muffin or cereal and as the afternoon sun made its descent for the day. She would conjure an image of you from the empty space before her.

Along with prominent eyes and long, slender hands, I inherited my mother’s love for good writing, too. Several months ago, when I accepted Emilie-Noelle Provost’s piece, “The Dinner Party,” for this issue of

*Résonance*, I was drawn to the narrator's whimsical private thoughts during a dinner with her husband and daughter. This mother has a palpable sense of self at the same time that she finds herself absorbed by both the banal and disorderly details of her daughter's life. (Love between a mother and child is like that, isn't it? We can't but walk forward together, though we may not always find the other to be a particularly captivating companion, though we know that whatever terrible thing lies ahead for the other will consume us, too.) Today, just two months following my mother's death, particular lines from "The Dinner Party" swell as I read: "Sometimes the forces against you can seem too enormous to bear, but you can beat them. You really can," the mother wishes she could tell her daughter.

The different speech patterns between family members in "Cajun Crabs" caught my attention late in our reading period. Eamon speaks, perhaps, a sort of Anglophone joul, and his sister Caitlyn speaks more standardized English. And Franco-Americans *are* familiar with this phenomenon, aren't we? Our *mémères* and *pépères*, for example, may have accents that we don't. After eight years in Québec, I could understand my mother perfectly when she spoke French, her native language; and she couldn't understand a word I said when I responded in French, me and my big Anglophone accent. "Mom!" I remember saying incredulously over the phone from my apartment in Montréal, a mile or two from the nursing school she attended as a young woman. You *really* don't understand me when I say that I had *aiglefin* for supper?" (Or *poulet* or *pâtes* or *steak*.)

And the names in these works: "Muriel" (my mother's name) from "Mariage dans les nuages," and "Lucille" (my Aunt Lou's name) from "La Lutte Finale de Lucille LeBlanc." When our parents and grandparents, *nos tantes* and *nos oncles*, pronounce these names, we feel the pull of a particular culture, *ragoût de boulettes*, *le réveillon*, schools attached to churches, and servile deference to authority. We understand more perfectly who we are. A young Québécoise woman immerses herself in an American Francophone culture in "From Arnaudville to New Orleans." As she crosses a "high rise bridge" early in the piece, we sense a path, *un chemin*, being more thoroughly cleared between Franco America and Québec.

And that's not even mentioning the poetry, the essays, the other genres in this issue.

A word about Melissa Pelletier Provencher, the artist for issue two: Melissa was my friend in high school, and I remember her drawing in a notebook each day at the cafeteria table, as mentioned in my interview with her. Melissa and I became friends again during my two years with my mother in Biddeford. Then, and since, on my visits from Montréal, Melissa visited us at the house, often bringing an art project with her. My mother truly admired her work. "Boy, that girl is talented," my mother said again this last spring, after Melissa had left the

house. (A few months later, Melissa and I would pick raspberries for my mother on Melissa's land.) My mother loved birds and the ocean and Maine, all things Melissa so carefully focuses on in her art. What a stroke of fortune to have her as the artist for this issue, the issue dedicated to my mother.

My mother was loveliness and gentleness and beautiful prose. Something else the narrator of "The Dinner Party" says sticks with me today: "It's funny how a person can have their life completely upended and find their way back to normalcy, even happiness, in a relatively short time." This line is one my mother, in all her resilience and simple joys, would have enjoyed reading.

2020

## Maine and Travel in Art: An Interview with Melissa Pelletier Provencher

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### Recommended Citation

Martin, Jane E. and Provencher-Pelletier, Melissa (2020) "Maine and Travel in Art: An Interview with Melissa Pelletier Provencher," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/3>

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**Can you tell us a bit about yourself?**

I am a self-taught artist from Biddeford, Maine who works primarily in colored pencil. I have been drawing all of my life and still have pictures that I did when I was very young. For the last 15 years I have owned and operated a small print shop in Kennebunk, Maine called Brown Fox Printing. In addition to the custom print projects I do for others, some of whom are also artists, my shop allows me to produce products, like art prints and notecards, that feature my original art. I have also written, illustrated, and produced a fun line of children's activity books—The Wicked Good Maine Activity Book series—of which I have sold 15,000 copies over the last ten years or so. They have been available for purchase in more than 60 stores throughout New England.

Growing up, I lived in many different places across the US and Germany. My father was in the military, and we moved every 3 or 4 years. For the last 33 years, I have lived in southern Maine.

I think there are two types of artists: those who are born with a natural gift and those who have to work at it—I have to work at it.

**What inspired you to create this piece? How did you create it?**

This piece took on a life of its own. (I love when art takes an unexpected turn in a new direction—it makes the entire process more enjoyable when I don't know where it will end up.) I started with the bird and had fully intended on making a more realistic piece, but then got the idea that adding some intricate designs would make it a far more interesting process for me to work through. I'm really pleased with the way this one turned out—it inspired a number of other



pieces that I am very happy with. This piece, which I have not named, is a mixed medium work using colored pencil, ink, and graphite pencil on 140# Strathmore watercolor paper.

**Your work, like this piece, is often very detailed. Why do you think you draw such precise and intricate images? Are you a very analytical person, generally?**

I like the challenge of a detailed/intricate piece. Some of that may be influenced by my admiration for MC Escher's work. I could easily turn out masses of work if I had a more laid-back approach to my art, but I don't think those methods would produce something I am really happy with. I would definitely say I am an analytical person, and it is reflected in the art I produce.

**Do you think of yourself as having a particular artistic style?**

No, I like to try new techniques and styles with my art. One week I may enjoy drawing photo-realistic pieces, and the next week I may begin to draw in a surreal style. Most artists do have a distinctive look to their work, but I like to mix it up. The one constant is my choice of medium—colored pencil, but I do also use watercolor, ink, and regular drawing pencils.

**Your family name, “Pelletier-Provencher” is very Franco-American. Before you and I started talking about our shared Franco-American heritage these past few years, did you think about it much?**

No, I never really thought too much about my heritage. I am Franco-American, and that is just a fact I have always known and never really investigated much. But after having many fantastic talks with you about our common heritage, I would like to take the time to learn more about my ancestors, their struggles, and where they came from. I recently returned from France

where I visited regions I believe much of my lineage originates from. It was a great trip full of wonderful surprises.

**Do you think your heritage influences your work in any way? If so, how?**

No, I think I am just a creative person who needs to express myself through art. My heritage does not influence my work in any way—at this point—but that could change if I learn a bit more about where my lineage comes from. That’s one of the joys of being an artist: I never know where my inspiration will come from and what direction it may take me.

**We were friends in high school, and I remember you sketching at the cafeteria table during lunch. Did you start drawing in high school, or before then? Did you grow up in an artistic family?**

I have been drawing my entire life—I have fun sketches I did when I was 5 or 6 years old. My mother and grandmother really encouraged me, and I am so grateful for their support. I remember sitting at the kitchen table and drawing with my mother. She taught me some fun techniques and has always been my biggest fan. One year for Christmas, my parents gave me an art studio in a box kit. It was the best gift I ever received and captured my interest in art for life. Once in high school, I really got serious about my work. There are a few other family members who enjoy creating things, or enjoy crafting pieces—my grandmother loved crafting and tried her hand at drawing and painting later in her life, and some of my nephews have expressed an interest in drawing and painting.

**I remember, sometime around junior year of high school, you suddenly disappeared.**

**Many years later, when we reconnected, you told me that you had moved to Germany**

**during this time. In fact, you lived in many different places early in life, and now, you travel extensively with your husband. Do you think exposure to various cities and countries impacts your art?**

I come from a military family. My father was a career Army man and a war veteran, and my family lived in many different places. So yes, my junior year of high school was spent in Germany. Though I did not fully appreciate the opportunity at the time, that year away greatly influenced my desire to produce art and inspired me to work hard to produce better pieces. The American school I attended had a great arts program with dedicated teachers. I was surrounded by students who shared my passions—it was a great experience. Today, I continue to visit Germany on a regular basis as I feel it is my second home. Some of the friendships I made while living there are still with me 35 years later. I have kept in contact with a couple of my former classmates who went on to pursue careers in art. They continue to inspire me to this day.

**What kind of artwork do you most like observing or learning from?**

I enjoy all sorts of artwork, from the surreal to the realistic. I have found inspiration in many artists, including MC Escher, who has a fantastic style that I really love, Beverly Doolittle and her wonderfully detailed “hide and seek” pieces, Gustav Klimt’s works in gold, Johannes Vermeer’s beautifully composed paintings, and many of the old masters. Living in Maine and owning my own print shop has also given me the opportunity to meet lots of talented local artists, which can help to keep me focused and motivated.

**Are you able to tell us anything about what you are working on currently?**

I have always wanted to write and illustrate a children's picture book, so I am toying with the idea of finally doing one. At this point, the title I have in mind is "If Guinea Pigs Could Paint." It will be a charming story about achieving your dreams and will feature some of the many pets my family had when I was growing up. I have been working on developing the characters for this project for a couple of months now and hope to have it completed in a year or so. I am so excited about finally doing this. I will probably only produce a limited quantity for family and friends, but I may try to get it published with a traditional Maine publisher.

# Résonance

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Volume 2

Article 8

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2020

## Écoute

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### Recommended Citation

Tremblay, Bill (2020) "Écoute," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/8>

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## ÉCOUTE

by Bill Tremblay

Flashes of sound pulse outward  
from children's cries as vaccination needles pierce  
soft shoulder muscles and piano notes  
chords and melody of a minuet as other schoolkids  
in ante-bellum tuxes and white hoop skirts  
make bridges with their arms arching.  
Some vibrations soothe, some shock, some rumble  
low as a caterpillar inching across sidewalk cracks,  
an under-sound below the human hearing.

Five o'clock winter, factory whistles mingle  
with vesper bells. Men, women, overcoats, galoshes,  
slop through slush from mills home to make supper,  
sleet stinging their faces, the final *travail* of Adam's curse.  
My aunt says "*Écoutez et apprenez.*" I like the rhyme.  
Listen and learn, she tells me.  
By ear I can tell foot stomps by fat hairy wrestlers  
make punches sound like jack-hammers cleaving cement.  
It's not real when they grunt like wild boars  
rooting for truffles. What is all this sound for  
but yearnings of hearts with wings?

Summers, the ice-man clomps upstairs  
to the second floor of a triple-decker tenement  
with his orange rubber cape, tongs chunked  
into a fifty-pound block as Mme. LePlante opens the door  
in her house-dress: *Comment se va, George?*  
Vegetable men in a canvas-top truck whip up dust  
as they charge down the street singing their obligato:  
*Tomatoes, potatoes, cu-cumbers,*  
*ripe juicy melons, fresh from the vine.*  
Dizzy's father shambles drunk, slipping on sand  
Laid down by plows scraping sparks.

His wife sighs in the kitchen.  
She married a child and now must put him to bed.  
A Ford pickup rumbles after him.  
Fish men arrive from stinging ocean swells with tuna  
from the Outer Banks. On the radio a woman's voice:

"Once I had a secret love that lived within  
the heart of me." She reaches for a crowning sound:  
"Now I shout it from the highest hills ..."

Car brakes screech, a dog whimpers.  
People on Central Street hold their breath.  
Silence is the death of sound. Sound is the death of silence.

Like gears in a wind-up train set  
with a train station, stores, houses, a church,  
God's tongue bonging, just as any town does.  
My mother and father speak French to keep their secrets.  
I agree: I don't want to know.  
She has a recording she plays on the Victrola:  
a woman sings *allez vous-en, allez vous-en*.  
I can hear the heartbreak in her throat but not the reason.  
English is my mother tongue. I cling to it as if it were  
a life-raft and I lost on the open sea.  
*Si le Paradis est notre véritable maison,  
qu'est-ce que c'est, mon petit, qu'est-ce que c'est?*

# Résonance

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Volume 2

Article 9

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2020

## Station Break

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### Recommended Citation

Parenteau, Chad (2020) "Station Break," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/9>

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## Station Break

Love is wasted on the beloved,  
hands firmly nailed into their pockets,

their resurrection another laundry day.  
*Yes I was at your side when you died again.*

*Yes, I held your hand as you left us.  
What time does the next bus come?*

They ask over and over aloud  
why God has forgotten them.

God forgot because God is God  
with the power to do what we all want,

to salve our cockled memories,  
wipe every dying breath off our necks,

return the skin to our knees  
from every time we tried to break

another messianic fall, each time  
crowing that things would be different.

We hope the next last supper is our last.  
We want our bread to taste like bread again.

2020

## The Dinner Party

Emilie-Noelle Provost

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### Recommended Citation

Provost, Emilie-Noelle (2020) "The Dinner Party," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/10>

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## The Dinner Party

By Emilie-Noelle Provost

It wasn't until we were settled into a corner booth at Arturo's, a tapas restaurant that Georgie liked, that I finally got a good look at her. She was happy, glowing even, much more self-confident than I had been at her age. Georgie's handbag, scarf and shoes were perfectly coordinated. She had always been a stylish kid.

Georgie had class until six on Mondays so it was already dark when we picked her up at her apartment, a cavernous, mostly unheated space a half-mile from campus that occupied the entire third floor of a Worcester triple-decker. Georgie gave her father and me each a peck on the cheek before fastening her seatbelt.

"Oh, you got me a balloon!" Georgie said when she discovered the Mylar "happy birthday" balloon waiting for her in the back seat. "You guys are the best."

Georgie's boyfriend, a finance major who'd grown up in Hawaii, the youngest child in a wealthy family, had broken up with her a month before. I knew the shifty little bastard was bad news the first time I met him. But Georgie had been devastated. It was good to see her smiling again.

"Go ahead and order some wine for us," Paul said to Georgie when the waiter came to the table. "You're 21 now. We should celebrate."

Georgie nodded. She had been drinking wine at home since she was 16, but I could tell she was hesitant. All the wines on the menu were from Spain and none of us knew a thing about any of them.

"Well, congratulations," the waiter said to Georgie, perhaps with a bit too much enthusiasm. "Maybe I can help you choose something."

I couldn't have imagined wanting to go out to dinner with my parents on my 21st birthday, not that they would have taken me. They had divorced when I was seven and were both remarried and busy with new families by the time my 21st came around. Georgie was coming home for Thanksgiving later that week, but she had insisted that her birthday wouldn't be the same unless we were all together.

I was only 20 the day I sat down next to Paul in the front row of Professor Rivers' History of Modern China class — a place I never sat, but I had forgotten my glasses. Within a month I knew I would marry him.

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By Emilie-Noelle Provost

I've told that story to Georgie a hundred times. She never gets tired of hearing it. Sometimes I hope the same thing will happen to her, that she will meet someone wonderful when she least expects it — the old fashioned way, in person, not on one of those dating apps. People, especially women my age, talk all the time about how great it would be to be young again, but I don't think so. Being young is hard. Sure, there's excitement and promise, but there's also poverty and heartbreak, and a lot of worrying about things that, you realize years later, don't make one bit of difference, like whether your silverware matches or what size bra you wear.

As I watched Georgie discussing wine with the waiter, it was hard to not wonder how I had gone from that fateful day in my Chinese history class to this one so quickly. All the things that made up our lives as a family — Christmas mornings, days at the beach, shopping trips, even our dear pet cats buried beside the white oak in the yard, seemed so far away just then, almost as if they had happened to someone else.

The waiter, obviously a professional, talked Georgie into a \$40 bottle of *rioja gran reserva* which he opened at the table with great flourish, pouring an inch of the ruby liquid into her glass. She tasted it and gave her approval, looking sophisticated as she set the wineglass down on the table.

"We're studying Judy Chicago in my contemporary art class this week," Georgie said as she looked over the menu. "She was a very important feminist artist in the '70s. Her work is amazing. I want to go to the Brooklyn Museum over Christmas break to see her installation, *The Dinner Party*. It's this huge triangular table set for a banquet. Each of the place settings is for an important woman, someone who's made a difference for other women."

The waiter was back. A good-looking kid in his late 20s sporting a set of sideburns, he couldn't take his eyes off Georgie. "If you like contemporary art, you should visit the Mass MoCA museum out in North Adams. I went there last summer. It was really something," he said.

As if she was used to this sort of thing, Georgie just smiled at him. "Do you guys know what you want?" she said.

When Paul and I were first married we lived in a one-bedroom apartment in a cardboard box of a building next to an industrial park. The rent was \$575 a month, which at the time seemed like an impossible amount. I was still in graduate school, cleaning rich people's houses part time. Paul had recently earned a masters degree but was still working the retail job he'd had while he was in school. On a good week

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By Emilie-Noelle Provost

we had about \$40 to spend on groceries — the same amount as Georgie’s bottle of wine.

I remember feeling like Paul and I were the only people among our friends who didn’t have their act together. Most people we knew had gone to private colleges and had real jobs. Many of our friends had already bought houses or condos, some with their parents’ help, but still. We were always worried about money.

When I got pregnant with Georgie, one of my friends from high school, a woman who had been a bridesmaid in my wedding, told me I was crazy. “How are you going to take care of it?” she said.

Georgie’s birth was a trial and, if I’m honest, it’s most likely the reason I never had another child. But after 36 hours of labor that ended with an emergency C-section in the middle of the night, I was lucky enough to be presented with the most precious gift I would ever receive. When Paul told me we had a girl it was like the heavens opened up. Georgie didn’t cry. The first time I saw her, she had one eye open and was busy looking around the room.

The waiter was setting dish after small dish of tapas on the table. A plate of pork meatballs and a dish of tiny grilled eggplants swathed in olive oil landed in front of Georgie. “Tell me about Europe. What did you guys do?” she said.

Paul pulled his cellphone out of his pocket and handed it to her. “Here are some photos I took in Paris. You would have loved it. There are so many museums and beautiful old churches. Lots of good food, too. You could practice your French.”

Georgie flipped through the photos. “These are really good, Dad. You should think about getting a real camera. My friend Andy is taking an analog photography class this semester. It’s so much work. We hardly ever see him. It’s hard to believe that’s how people used to process photos all the time. His photos look great, though. They’re so much different than digital.”

Art has been Georgie’s passion since she was old enough to hold a crayon. When she decided to study art history in college, she got a lot of crap from people who felt they were being helpful by asking her what she was going to do with an art history degree. Thank goodness she’s learned to ignore them. People said similar things to Paul and me. We were both European history majors. Sometimes I feel like no one in the world has any sort of imagination.

## The Dinner Party

By Emilie-Noelle Provost

When Georgie left for college it took Paul and me a while to figure out how to be a couple again. I was always cooking too much food. Now sometimes I don't even bother to close the bathroom door. It's funny how a person can have their life completely upended and find their way back to normalcy, even happiness, in a relatively short time. In some ways I suppose it wasn't that much different from when Georgie was born.

Paul and I travel now, usually in the fall. We've been to Rome and Paris and last year we took a cruise up the Saint Lawrence River from Montreal to the Canadian Maritimes. The first time we went away I was paranoid the whole time that something would happen to Georgie at school.

Maybe it's because she's an only child, but I often forget how old Georgie is. When I was 21 I could take care of myself. I did, in fact. I handled flirting waiters and jerks harassing me at parties, and made sure I paid my phone bill on time. I know she does all those things, too. But I worry sometimes about whether she'll be strong enough to stand up for the things that are best for her, even if they make other people unhappy. There are so many obstacles girls have to overcome. I wish I could tell her that the way she looks isn't as important as she thinks it is. And that sometimes the forces against you can seem too enormous to bear, but you can beat them. You really can.

Instead of birthday cake, Georgie wanted *churros* — sticks of cinnamon-coated fried dough that you dip in chocolate sauce. It's a good thing they don't serve them at very many places because I'd be eating them all the time.

When we got up to leave, the waiter helped Georgie and me with our coats. The poor kid was really desperate. I half expected him to ask her for her phone number right in front of Paul and me. Maybe he did ask her for it. It's not the kind of thing she would tell me about.

It seems ironic, considering how we felt about them at the time, but many of the friends Paul and I were envious of when we were younger are divorced now. Some have been divorced twice. One couple we know just broke up a few months ago, after being married for more than 20 years. It just goes to show that you shouldn't bother too much with comparing your life to other people's.

I want to tell Georgie this on the ride back to her apartment, but when we park the car out front, she says, "Oh, look, it's Molly." One of Georgie's roommates, Molly suddenly appears next to our car holding a grocery store birthday cake encased in a plastic dome, a bottle of cheap chardonnay tucked under her arm.

## The Dinner Party

By Emilie-Noelle Provost

“Come on, birthday girl. We’re having a party in your honor,” Molly says. The next course in Georgie’s banquet had arrived, the other guests already seated at the table.

Georgie grabs her balloon from the back seat. “Love you guys. Thanks so much for dinner.”

“Be careful,” Paul hollers out the window after the girls. “No driving, OK.”

Georgie turns around and gives him a look that says *what do you think, I’m an idiot?* Then she blows us a kiss and waves goodbye.

2020

## La lutte finale de Lucille LeBlan

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### Recommended Citation

Nolan, James and MOUREY, MARIE-FRANCE (2020) "La lutte finale de Lucille LeBlan," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/11>

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## LA LUTTE FINALE DE LUCILLE LeBLANC

par James Nolan

traduit par Marie-France Mourey<sup>1</sup>

Un jour de décembre Célestine s'allongea au milieu du parloir et ne bougea plus pendant trois semaines. « Je ne sais pas s'il faut que j'appelle le curé ou le remorqueur », Lucille se plaignait à ma grand-mère au téléphone. « Il me faudrait une grue pour la déplacer. Je n'peux pas inviter vous tous pour Noël avec cette femme qui se lamente entre la télé et le piano ».

« Jack, va voir si tu peux faire quelque chose, » ma grand-mère m'exhorta. Tenter de faire quelque chose pour les Leblancs c'était comme si on essayait de faire quelque chose avec la guerre de sécession. C'était du passé, et moi j'étais de l'avenir.

Célestine était une énorme femme avec des dents en or ; le plancher tremblait sous ses pas. Lucille était maigrichonne et maligne ; elle avait une peau marbrée de deux tons de blanc différents et de marron. Mais elle était en meilleur état que sa sœur Mignonne, qui se servait d'un déambulateur pour se déplacer, et si sourde qu'elle n'entendait même pas le téléphone sonner. Lorsqu'elle se mettait debout Lucille était prise de vertiges et devait se rasseoir aussitôt. Les sœurs avaient toutes plus de soixante-quinze ans. Lucille aimait à dire qu'entre elles trois il y avait au moins une bonne pair de jambes, une bonne paire d'oreilles et une bonne paire d'yeux.

Célestine avait travaillé pour la famille Leblanc pendant vingt-cinq ans dans la plantation caribéenne dilapidée de Bayou Road. Elle avait astiqué, et fait des grillades pour les six excentriques frères et sœurs Créoles qui se chipotaient. Aucun d'eux ne s'était jamais marié où

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<sup>1</sup> Publié à l'origine en anglais: James Nolan, « Lucille LeBlanc's Last Stand, » *You Don't Know Me: New and Selected Short Stories* (University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2014).

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n'avait travaillé. La voix tonitruante de Célestine rebondissait de la cuisine à la galerie, donnant des ordres à tous ceux qui se trouvaient sur son passage. Le dimanche, quand nous étions à table, elle se perchait sur un haut tabouret devant son fourneau, et dirigeait la conversation par la porte ouverte. Elle nous donnait des ordres sur ce qu'on devait manger, quelle quantité nous devions avaler, et servait ses entremets de conseils et de commérages. Toute opinion divergente devait attendre son verdict, délivré vigoureusement avec le plat suivant. Lucille préférait changer de sujet plutôt que de donner raison à Célestine.

Célestine était toute aussi effarée que les LeBlancs de voir le quartier de Bayou Road se dégrader, et s'aventurait au-delà de la barrière en bois encore moins souvent qu'eux. Elle prétendait avoir peur qu'un jeune homme avec un portatif jouant de la musique à fond d'une main et un gros bâton de l'autre, ne l'attaque à l'arrêt du bus. Ces dernières années, sauf pour la messe du matin à Sainte Rose de Lima, seule Lucille quittait la maison, après avoir mis son chapeau et son collier de perles, pour se rendre « en ville » (comme elle appelait encore la rue du Canal) et aller voir son avocat, son banquier, ou pour se battre avec les « grands gorilles » de la mairie.

D'abord, le département de la Santé Publique condamna les poulaillers et les élevages de canards. Les LeBlancs en avaient toujours eu, et ils furent forcés de manger de la viande achetée en magasin. Puis la ville fit fermer le puits et la citerne, les obligeant à laver leur viande avec de l'eau du robinet tirée du Mississippi. « Ceux-là de la Santé vont nous rendre malades pour sûr », Lucille répétait à qui voulait bien l'entendre. Mais le coup de grâce fut assaini quand la ville interdit les cheminées. En hiver, ils durent alors se réfugier autour de petits chauffages électriques branchés aux chandeliers de cristal, avec des rallonges qui pendaient dans les immenses pièces.

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Les vieilles familles du centre-ville n'élevaient plus de poules et ne buvait plus d'eau de citerne, me dit ma grand-mère, même si elle se souvenait de l'avoir fait quand elle était jeune quand elle vivait près des LeBlancs. Ma grand-mère était allée à l'école du couvent avec les sœurs LeBlancs. Mais à coté de Lucille et de Mignonne c'était une Mémère Totalement Moderne. Elle fumait des Salems, conduisait sa propre voiture, et avait probablement été la première personne dans tout l'Etat de Louisiane à posséder un Mix Master et un four à rôtisserie. « Les temps ont changé » tel était son adage. Elle aimait le bel acteur du show de General Electric qui, longtemps avant d'en être le président, répétait chaque semaine à la télévision que « le progrès est notre produit le plus important.»

A l'époque où la ville condamna les cheminées, les sœurs LeBlancs entrèrent dans une période de deuil dont elles ne ressortirent pas. Elles continuèrent à prendre leur long déjeuner tranquille à une heure de l'après-midi, et à faire la sieste, comme si le monde des embouteillages des neuf heures-cinq heures, et les autoroutes n'existaient pas. Pendant ce temps-là, la maison s'écroulait autour d'elles, rafistolée par de futiles efforts à contrôler la détérioration endémique des tropiques. Les tuyauteries éclatées étaient ravaudées avec des chiffons et du chatterton, des morceaux de linoleum bariolés couvraient les trous causés par les termites, et les volets cassés étaient bouclés avec des fils de fer. Le jardin était en friche, et quand j'étais plus âgé, j'enfilais des vieux jeans après le déjeuner du dimanche, et j'arrachais les mauvaises herbes, et taillais ce que je pouvais. Les sœurs menaçaient souvent de mettre la maison en vente et d'aller habiter à la campagne où leurs cousins avaient une plantation de sucre, mais la plantation finit par être achetée par une compagnie pétrolière, et la maison ne fut jamais vendue.

La débâcle commença avec Euphémie, la plus jeune des LeBlancs, convaincue que ses sœurs essayaient de l'empoisonner. Durant nos visites dominicales, elle apparaissait

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brusquement entre les grinçantes portes glissières qui séparaient la salle à manger du parloir, ses yeux en amande abaissés comme ceux d'une sœur novice, les bras dans le dos. Ses cheveux gris duveteux étaient coupés courts à la garçonne; elle ne pesait pas plus de 40 kilos. Elle parlait fort, d'une voix geignarde, comme une sourde qui apprend à parler.

Un jour, quand j'avais environ quatorze ans, elle entra, fit une courbette et me déposa un baiser timide sur la joue.

« Pourquoi Mademoiselle Euphie a-t-elle fait ça ? » demandai-je à Lucille en rougissant.

« Elle te prends pour Emile, le beau garçon du Bayou St Jean qui venait lui rendre visite. Mais Papa l'a chassé, alors il est parti là-bas se faire tuer par le Kaiser. Euphie Marie, elle ne s'en est jamais remise, j'te l'dis. »

La fois d'après, quand Euphémie apparut entre les portes à glissières, je lui baisai la main galamment, jouant le rôle du soupirant Créole fantôme. Euphémie se précipita vers la cuisine en hurlant. On entendit Célestine se débattre avec elle. Quand elle l'eut enfin calmée et attachée dans son lit, je demandai à Célestine ce qui s'était passé.

« Elle t'a pris pour le chiffonnier. Elle est arrivée en criant qu'un chiffonnier lui avait léché la main, et il a fallu que je lui lave cinq ou six fois pour en effacer l'odeur. »

Lucille refusait de faire enfermer sa sœur comme ses cousins lui recommandaient, et disait qu'elle ne pourrait jamais vendre la maison tant qu'Euphémie était vivante. Où allait-elle trouver un endroit assez grand pour que les voisins n'entendent pas ses cris ?

Après qu'Euphémie s'eut laissé mourir de faim, le frère aîné, Sylver, pris la relève. Il refusa de sortir de son lit jusqu'à sa mort. Soutenu par des oreillers, l'œil sauvage et la barbe hirsute, il réclamait des bières Dixie, et des Lucky Strikes. Célestine tenait un plateau en argent sous la cigarette qu'il avait à la bouche afin d'en récupérer la cendre, terrorisée à l'idée qu'il

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mette le feu à son lit. Il implorait en vain le miséricordieux Seigneur Jésus de l’emmener, jusqu’au jour où j’entendis Célestine lui dire sans mâcher ses mots, qu’il devrait avoir honte de demander au Seigneur de faire quelque chose qu’Il n’avait pas l’intention de faire à ce moment précis.

Le soir même Sylver mourut.

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Mes rendez-vous avec le dix-neuvième siècle duraient tout l’après-midi, surtout les visites solennelles comme celles qui suivaient le repas de Noël, quand ma grand-mère, ma mère, ma sœur et moi échangeions des cadeaux dans le cercle réduit des LeBlancs. Leurs deux cousines, les sœurs Lanoux à langue de vipère de la rue Nord Miro, étaient toujours là avec leur fille Adrienne et Jérôme, un garçon de mon âge. Le parloir sentait comme l’intérieur d’une vieille valise en cuir, et je passais des heures assis bien droit sur ma chaise, le papier d’emballage en aluminium rouge d’une nouvelle paire de boutons de manchette balancé sur les genoux. Mon grand-père avait tellement serré mon nœud de cravate que je pouvais à peine avaler ma liqueur de cerise.

Tout le monde parlait en même temps, à personne en particulier, en français, en anglais, dans les deux langues. Des oreilles américaines croyaient entendre une altercation même quand tout le monde était d’accord. C’était le style de conversation que l’on appelait le *cancan*, comme la danse, déchaîné mais pas aussi osé. Hochant la tête au rythme du *cancan* je me frottais les mains à rebrousse-poil contre le crin de la chaise.

« Margot, dites-moi encore quel âge a ce garçon, oh là, comme il est grand." Lucille se tournait alors vers moi. « Alors, Ti-Jacques, tu veux une Barq's ou un Big Shot? T’es peut-être pas assez grand pour une liqueur de cerise. *Ma cousine le fabrique en la campagne pour la famille toutes les fêtes de Noël* mais c’est peut-être trop fort pour toi. »

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J'avais l'impression d'être dans une cage, avec des grandes perruches en robe de rayonne à fleurs et des grosses godasses noires aux pieds ; des barrettes flamboyantes retenaient leurs longues mèches blanches. Elles piaillaient et criaient, remplissant la cage de plumes, battant des ailes et sautant d'un perchoir à l'autre. Balancées sur le bord de leurs chaises, elles se trempaient le bec rapidement dans les minuscules verres qu'elles tenaient à la main. Dehors, j'entendais les pives de pins tomber sur les chaises à bascules de la galerie, et je sentais le soleil s'immobiliser au centre d'un ciel d'étain.

Dans la boule de cristal de l'armoire à bibelots, il neigeait à chaque fois que je le souhaitais.

Des coupes en verre taillé, alignées sur les rayons, reflétaient les miroirs biseautés. Le haut plafond avait la couleur des pages d'un vieux bouquin, la peinture en lambeaux. Le parloir me rappelait un magasin d'antiquaire de la rue Royale encombré de potiches chinoises, de candélabres, de dahlias sauvages dans des cadres dorés, de chaises canées couleur de dents de fumeur, et un vrai parcours du combattant de dessertes et de guéridons. Un énorme ventilateur pendait du plafond, comme une hélice immobile. Le tabouret du piano lui, tournait bien, et ma sœur virevoltait dessus dans sa robe jaune à plastron, avec ses jupons amidonnés et ses chaussures vernies qui touchaient à peine le plancher. Un petit sapin de Noël luisait sur le piano et des rois mages en plâtre et leurs chameaux en traversaient le couvercle— cloué—à la recherche de l'étoile scintillante en argent.

Le Noël qui suivit la fermeture des cheminées des LeBlancs, leur cousin Goozy Dordain leur commanda, du catalogue de Montgomery Ward, une cheminée en carton munie d'un spot giratoire derrière un écran de cellophane rouge. Pour ne pas le vexer, Lucille l'installait chaque année. On regardait en silence, sur le nouvel écran de télé la neige tomber sur New York, tout en

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sirotant notre liqueur de cerise. Dans le parloir glacial, la lumière rouge de la cheminée illuminant nos visages. On réarrangeait sans arrêt les chauffages électriques.

Tout le monde disait « C'est vraiment beau », mais on rentrait tôt.

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Lucille avait mis la cheminée en carton dans l'entrée, elle était prête à l'installer quand Célestine se coucha au milieu du parloir. Des années durant, les frères et sœurs prirent place dans la file des mourants, jusqu'à ce qu'il ne reste plus que Lucille, Célestine et Mignonne. Puis, sans raison particulière Célestine décida que c'était son tour.

Comme les dames blanches pour lesquelles elle avait travaillé, Célestine ne s'était jamais mariée. « Qui voudrait d'elle ? » remarquait Lucille quand Célestine ne pouvait pas l'entendre. Célestine était de la campagne, de la Paroisse d'Assomption. Elle avait des croyances bizarres, et tout un assortiment de petits animaux, qui étaient ses esprits disait-elle. Un jour que je cherchais du sucre dans le garde-manger une tortue caouanne, qui se cachait parmi les boîtes de conserve, me mordit la main. Tout en la frottant avec de l'alcool, Célestine m'annonça que la tortue la soignait.

J'étais alors en première année de fac, j'avais des cheveux longs, et je défilais dans les manifestations sur les droits civils. Encore sous le choc de la morsure de la tortue, et me sentant coupable de la ségrégation de l'époque, je prenais place à la table de la cuisine en face de Célestine, chose que je n'avais jamais faite, et nous parlions de réincarnation. On y croyait tous les deux.

« Rien ne meurt » me disait Célestine. « Tout passe d'un stade à un autre. Ces animaux que j'ai amenés sont mes gens de la campagne. Ils sucent ma misère, et la remette dans la terre.

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Un jour je serai eux, ou ils seront moi, ou Mamzelle Lucille ou ta Mémère. C'est nos gens aussi».

Les discussions que j'avais dans la cuisine avec Célestine sur mes idées hippies n'étaient pas vues d'un bon œil par les LeBlancs, ni par ma famille. Ils exigèrent que Lucille mette la tortue sous la maison dans un trou, et la firent se débarrasser des lézards, des souris des champs, et des serpents de jardins, qu'elle avait cachés dans tous les recoins de la cuisine. Quant je revins en visite Célestine éclata : « J'espère que tu ne m'en voudras pas si je te dis en face que tu aurais bien meilleure allure si tu n'avais pas tous ses cheveux qui te pendent dans la figure ». Alors qu'elle tentait subrepticement d'attraper ses ciseaux de barbier, je m'excusai et filai sauter dans un bus.

Le mal que Célestine tentait de guérir avec sa tortue caouanne devait être terriblement réel, parce que la maison sentait si mauvais que seuls les amis fideles et la famille venait lui rendre visite. Je remarquai la puanteur pour la première fois quand ma grand-mère m'expliqua dans un chuchotement théâtral que « Célestine s'était souillée ». Nous quittâmes la cuisine par la galerie arrière. Mais une âcre odeur d'urine avait envahi les boiseries, les nappes, et les tentures. L'odeur était accentuée par la peur des courants d'air des Créoles, et les volets restaient bouclés. Lucille et Mignonne n'avaient pas conscience de l'odeur; elles vivaient avec. Mais au en pénétrant dans leur maison par un après-midi d'été, je me demandais comment on pouvait vivre de la sorte.

Après les odeurs ce furent les ordures. J'étais abasourdi par le nombre de sacs en papier que ma grand-mère sortait et empilait dans sa voiture à chaque fois qu'elle allait voir les LeBlancs. Un après-midi j'en portai trois, elle deux. Ils pesaient une tonne. Au début je ne posais pas de question, je pensais que c'était des vieilles fringues destinées aux bonnes sœurs du Foyer



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des Incurables, ou des pots de confitures de figues, ou de liqueur de cerise, qui dureraient pour le reste de mes jours. Finalement, ne pouvant plus résister, je demandai à ma grand-mère ce qu'il y avait dans les sacs.

« Ne dis rien à personne, Jack, » me répondit-elle, « mais Célestine ne veut pas que Lucille ou Mignonne ne jette quoi que ce soit. Elle s'est mise dans la tête que les ordures avaient de la valeur. Journaux, bouteilles de lait, boîtes de conserve, tout s'empile dans la maison à tel point que Lucille dort sur le sofa dans le parloir parce que sa chambre est envahie par une montagne de déchets. »

Je jetai un coup d'œil dans un des sacs sur le siège arrière. Il était rempli de sacs en plastiques des pains Holsom, et de boîtes de café du French Market Coffee & Chicory.

« On a décidé qu'à chaque fois que je viendrais, on ferait comme si on revenait de faire des courses au magasin Maison Blanche, tu sais, et on se débarrasserait des ordures de cette façon. Le plus triste c'est qu'on ne savait pas que Célestine cachait son argent entre les pages des vieux journaux jusqu'à ce que six billets d'un dollar tombent par terre. Maintenant il fallait qu'on épluche les journaux, et on mettait son argent sous sa bible sur la cheminée de sa chambre. Elle économisait pour son enterrement».

La contrebande d'ordures dura plusieurs mois, jusqu'au jour où Célestine décida de faire sa paillasse dans le parloir, et de s'allonger dessus pour y mourir.

Lucille nous faisait un rapport quotidien. « Elle aime dormir par terre...comme toi », Lucille marquait une pause pour accentuer notre intrigue hippie... mais d'habitude elle dort dans le couloir du fond près de la cuisine. Dieu sait que j'en ai pour jusqu'à Pâques de nettoyer sa chambre. Ça fait dix ans que je la supplie d'aller voir un docteur, mais elle me dit qu'elle n'a pas besoin de docteur. Et à chaque fois que je parle d'ambulance, elle se met à hurler. Tu l'entends,

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elle recommence. Faut que j’y aille. Je sers cette femme comme si c’était la reine de Saba. Dis à ta Mémère que je l’appellerai plus tard. Et fais une prière pour moi ».

Assise sur le banc à commérages à côté du téléphone noir carré, Lucille appelait toute la famille, demandant à chacun ce qu’elle devait faire. Sa cousine, Tante Sis de la rue North Miro, lui suggéra « de passer les caleçons de Célestine à la lessive ». Lucille effectuait cette corvée tous les soirs dans la baignoire, et emmaillotait Célestine de culottes propres chaque matin. Célestine gémissait et blasphémait. Elle adjurait son Créateur pendant que Lucille se débattait avec elle pour la changer. L’odeur avait été moins suffocante la dernière fois que nous avons vu Célestine.

Elle gisait étalée sous une pile de couvertures rapiécées alors qu’il faisait particulièrement doux en cette journée de décembre. Malgré les lessives, une odeur pestilentielle de pisser flottait dans l’air. De forts rayons de soleil filtraient à travers les persiennes, et faisaient des ombres zébrées dans la pièce, saisissant au passage des particules de poussière qui tombaient dans les lents courants du ventilateur. Une sorte de grisaille fatiguée flottait dans l’air. On se pencha sur Célestine comme sur une tombe impromptue.

Au premier abord, le lit de mort ressemblait à une montagne de haillons, avec un gros caillou vert dessus, qui haletait. En y regardant de plus près, je m’aperçus que seul le visage bleu cendré de Célestine était visible, perlé de gouttes de sueur, les yeux roulés en arrière. La tortue était posée sur son énorme ventre, la queue et les pattes rentrées dans la carapace racornie. La tête au bout du cou allongée nous regardait avec provocation de ses yeux rouges. Elle semblait monter la garde sur Célestine, et je me souvins qu’elle mordait.

Je cru l’entendre souffler. Je me teins à distance.

Lucille nous fit passer sur la galerie, et Mignonne nous suivit, claquant son déambulateur.

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« Elle dit qu'elle lui aspire sa misère, la tortue. Que son âme va aller l'habiter quand elle sera de l'autre côté, et après je devrai la remettre sous la maison », dit Lucille. « J'ai déjà bien assez à faire sans m'enquiquiner d'une sale caouanne. Quand je lui dis que je vais en faire une soupe de sa caouanne, elle hurle encore plus fort ».

Mignonne se balançait dans son fauteuil de bambou usé, le regard perdu dans le long chemin ombragé qui menait à la grille, comme si elle était en train de s'imaginer sa dernière sortie de Bayou Road. Elle secouait sa tête fanée en marmonnant par intervalles réguliers:

« Lucille avait raison ! » « On a fait c'qu'on a pu ».

« Est-ce que tu as essayé de faire autre chose, comme d'appeler une maison de retraite ? » ma grand mère lui demandait, pour la ramener sur terre. « J'ai entendu dire que le Berger Bienfaisant était très bien, pour les Blancs comme pour les Noirs ».

Lucille balaya le conseil comme s'il était tombé d'une autre planète. « Tous les jours je m'agenouille devant la Sainte Mère, et je lui demande ce qu'il faut que je fasse. Et hier j'ai reçu une réponse claire et nette: *appelle sa famille*. Alors j'ai finalement appelé une femme dans la Paroisse d'Assomption qui prétend que Célestine est sa grande tante. Elle m'a dit, « Vous avez la tante Célestine ? » et j'ai lui dis « Si elle fait partie de ta famille, vient la chercher. Cette femme souffre trop. Nous, on a chacune un pied dans la tombe, ma sœur et moi ».

Je venais de passer mes examens de fin de trimestre, trois jours avant Noël, quand Lucille appela pour nous annoncer la mort de Célestine, et que sa nièce avait emmené le corps dans la Paroisse d'Assomption. La veille de Noël, au matin, ma grand-mère emmena Lucille et Mignonne à l'enterrement dans sa Plymouth turquoise. J'ai appris qu'en chemin Lucille avait passé sa tête, ornée d'un chapeau rose neuf, par la fenêtre de la voiture pour vomir. Avant de partir, elle m'avait demandé de la débarrasser de la tortue. J'ai attirée l'animal dans une boîte à

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chaussure, et je l'ai remise dans son trou sous la maison. J'ai inventé mes propres rites funéraires pour Célestine, avec les bougies votives et un pot de mayonnaise rempli d'eau bénite, que j'avais trouvé sur le prie-Dieu de Mignonne.

Alors que je m'affairais sous la maison, dont les piliers de briques la maintiennent au-dessus du niveau d'inondation, un coup de tonnerre annonça une de ces tempêtes louisianaises si soudaines qu'elles jettent le moment présent dans une parenthèse. J'ai passé un long moment sous les planchers de cyprès à allumer les bougies et à chanter un poème Choctaw que j'avais déchiré de mon livre de littérature, hypnotisé par les trombes d'eau. L'odeur de terre mouillée me rappela que Bayou Road avait été un chemin de halage boueux entre le Mississippi et le lac Pontchartrain au temps des Indiens. Au début du siècle, il avait été recouvert de briques. J'imaginai une procession d'Indiens Houma, leurs pirogues d'écorce balancées sur leurs têtes, se dirigeant vers le bayou. J'aspergeai le trou de gouttes d'eau bénite et les enterrai aussi.

Lucille m'avait souvent raconté une histoire que sa mère lui racontait. Un prêtre vaudou, qui s'appelait Jean Bayou, avait enterré de l'or sous la maison. Devant ma fascination enfantine elle m'avait promis que si un jour elle vendait la maison, on louerait des détecteurs de métal et on irait rechercher l'or enfoui sous la maison. En étudiant de près le trou où se trouvait la tenace tortue caouanne, j'en déduis que l'or était enterré dedans. J'aspergeai le reste de l'eau bénite et enterrai Jean Bayou et son or, que la tortue garderait, et Célestine avec sa misère, et - bien que je l'ignorai à ce moment-là -, mon passé, et celui qui existait bien avant ma naissance.

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Lucille et moi n'avons jamais loué de détecteur de métal pour chercher l'or de Jean Bayou. Le jour de l'orage fut ma dernière visite à Bayou Road. Nous n'avons pas fêté Noël le lendemain, et en l'espace d'un mois, Lucille et Mignonne, abandonnées dans leur ruine à courant d'air, mirent

**Traduction: La lutte finale de Lucille LeBlanc**

la maison en vente. Elles partirent s'installer à Destrehan, dans une pièce en béton construite dans le jardin de leur cousin Goozy, reliée à la maison par un passage couvert de tôles ondulées. Ma grand-mère, réprimant un frisson, me dit de ne pas aller les voir. Mignonne ne réagissait plus et Lucille était désorientée. Elle faisait sa valise pour rentrer à Bayou Road, pour y passer la serpillière, où quelque chose de ce genre. J'étais à la fac, j'avais d'autres choses en tête.

Lucille et Mignonne moururent toutes les deux dans leur chambre de béton l'année qui suivit leur déménagement de Bayou Road. Ma grand-mère dit que c'était mieux ainsi. J'habite dans une autre ville, dans un autre Etat où les poulets en liberté, le bilinguisme, boire de l'eau de pluie, recycler les déchets, et mourir chez soi est à la dernière mode. Je rigole tout haut en imaginant ce que Lucille penserait de tout cela. Elle avait toujours une parole mémorable, tirant le siècle dernier jusqu'au milieu de celui-ci avec une bride de mule.

Peu de temps avant son décès ma grand-mère m'envoya une découpeure du *Times Picayune* qui racontait comment un dot-com de San Francisco avait transformé la maison des LeBlancs en Bed and Breakfast, où les stars de la télévision descendaient quand elles venaient à la Nouvelle-Orléans. « Les temps ont changé ! » gribouilla-t-elle sous la photo en couleur de Mary Tyler Moore, assise sur la galerie. La chambre de Mignonne était recouverte d'une moquette beige qui entourait un jacuzzi. Une piscine remplaçait le poulailler. Je pouvais aller dans n'importe quelle banlieue cossue et voir la même chose. Je jetai l'article à la poubelle.

Après le décès de Mémère, nous avons fait venir le piano que les LeBlancs lui avaient donné. La fragile antiquité fut livré pendant une chute de neige une semaine avant Noël, et ma femme voulait arracher les clous rouillés, le faire accorder, et jouer des chants de Noël. Mais j'ai refusé, et exigé que le piano reste cloué. Pour me faire plaisir, elle n'insista plus quand je lui racontai ce que le soldat Yankee avait fait le jour de la mort de Lincoln.

**Traduction: La lutte finale de Lucille LeBlanc**

L'histoire disait que la grand-mère LeBlanc était en train de jouer du piano alors que la Nouvelle-Orléans était une ville occupée. Quand un soldat de l'Union vint lui dire de s'arrêter parce que la ville était en deuil, elle continua de jouer parce qu'elle ne comprenait pas un mot d'anglais. Il revint une deuxième fois, et elle lui montra la porte en souriant, et se remit à jouer. La troisième fois, il revint avec un marteau et cloua le couvercle. Pas une seule note n'est sortie de ce piano depuis ce jour où Lincoln a été assassiné, et le silence austère, et la défaite devrait y rester enfermé comme une sonate fantôme.

C'est tout ce qu'il me reste de mon enfance.

Tous les ans à Noël on fait un petit quelque chose. Des amis viennent prendre un verre, et je me retrouve sur le tabouret tournant du piano muet, à raconter l'histoire du dernier décembre à Bayou Road. Et pour mon fiston, j'aligne sur le couvercle du piano les rois mages et le chameau, toujours à la recherche de leur étoile.

2020

## From Arnaudville to New Orleans

Lisanne Gamelin

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### Recommended Citation

Gamelin, Lisanne (2020) "From Arnaudville to New Orleans," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/12>

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## CHAPTER I

### *From Arnaudville to New Orleans*

*by Lianne Gamelin*

“Look at the view. Look, look, look,” James said to Isabelle, pointing to the right side of the car, leaning forward on his wheel to have a glimpse too.

The window on her side was rolled all the way down, so Isabelle looked out, holding on to her beige fedora as she took in the spectacle of the Atchafalaya basin. They had gotten on Interstate 10—I-10—a little while back, past Cecilia. For a few miles, it had reminded her of Quebec’s highways with two lanes on each side and a wide median with freshly cut grass, bearing no trees.

Gradually a dense forest formed in the middle, eventually turning into waterways as they came up on a high-rise bridge reminding her of Prince Edward Island’s Confederation Bridge. But instead of the Canadian Gulf, this sight turned into an immense swamp, visible for miles, with tall sparse skinny cypress trees creating the misconception of small makeshift islands with their roots rising above the water. Several fishing boats were swiftly moving about the large wetland, as flocks of birds, mostly egrets, flew by on the horizon.

It was both impressive, and even a bit frightening, to look out from the Louisiana bridge, as it was one of the largest inland open water bodies Isabelle had ever come across.

Nature still owned what this man-made structure was timidly borrowing. Isabelle’s side of the highway faced south and offered the most beautiful scene according to James. It was indeed majestic, Isabelle agreed, but also a bit unnerving to cross such a



long bridge, especially when knowing that, if there were an accident, the next exit was miles away.

She understood why James, her internship supervisor, never grew tired of it, even if he was in his late forties and had driven this part of the highway all his life.

James Comeaux was a brilliant painter who had opened shop in Arnaudville, his hometown. It was a small rural municipality of 1,800 inhabitants in the heart of Acadiana, a Cajun stronghold of rural Louisiana located between Lafayette and Baton Rouge. Not only a visual artist, he was a natural-born storyteller, but it seemed to be a common character trait to most Louisianans. Isabelle had found out the first time he asked her to tag along for a day-trip to New Orleans, several weeks back. He had pointed out the view enthusiastically then too, visibly very proud of it.

They had gone to New Orleans several times in the last six weeks since her arrival from Montreal. The first time James had suggested she tag along, to drop off paintings at a client's home, Isabelle had automatically agreed, naturally curious to see the notorious city. When she had come down from Canada, her flight had landed in Lafayette, so she hadn't had the chance to visit the Big Easy yet.

"I warn you, it's almost a three-hour drive *to* New Orleans, if we hit a little bit of traffic, which we will."

"That's all right." Isabelle had said.

"Six hours total."

"Ok."

"It'll be a long day. And I don't wanna hear you bitchin'."

"Why would I be bitchin'?"

“Mm...’cause my AC’s busted.”

Isabelle hesitated, before adding. “Still fine.”

Louisiana, in late May, was like walking into a sauna where someone threw water on the rocks every five minutes. It felt sticky, like one of those aunty kisses during the Holiday season. However, after spending months freezing her ass off in Montreal, where it had just barely gotten above zero when she’d left in April, Isabelle wasn’t about to complain about the heat. She had also lived in Texas, spending a school year in the public system there to improve her English. The weather had also been terribly hot especially by her Canadian standards, but it had been a drier heat, much like opening an oven and standing in front of it for hours on end. Regardless, she wasn’t about to pass on the opportunity to see New Orleans for the first time, just because James’s AC was broken, even if it meant enduring a stifling ride of six hours. But it wasn’t just the faulty air-conditioner that would make this trip a challenge, she had come to realize on that first ride to New Orleans.

James’s car, a dark green Mazda Tribute, a 2008 model, was starting to break down and could only be described, loosely, as a moving trash can. The back window on the right side could no longer be rolled up fully—and it had been half-way down for God knows how long—plus, there was this pungent foul smell inside the car.

Two months prior, back in March, before Isabelle had arrived from Montreal, James had forgotten a milk carton in the car after getting groceries for the art collective volunteers. When his mama, Ms. Jo, had cleaned the car a little, she had found the inflated carton, picked it up just to have it burst into her hands, spraying curdled milk all

over the trunk. And since the compact SUV had only a thin flap covering the trunk area, the smell hadn't been restricted there.

Therefore, it helped a little that one of the windows was permanently rolled down, even if it rained inside a couple of times, which James seemed not to mind. Maybe, that was why he didn't get it fixed, Isabelle thought, so the smell could slowly get washed away through natural means.

From the beginning, Isabelle had appreciated James for his carefree attitude. She wished she could let go in the same way.

Right away, he had treated her as an equal. "Well, I knew I wasn't getting a dimwit when I saw your résumé. You have enough experience to run events on your own."

She'd been surprised by his brotherly attitude towards her. Maybe, it was sad that she was used to being belittled by superiors. Someone like James was rare, a person who didn't need to put you down to make themselves feel important.

The first time they had driven down to New Orleans to drop off paintings, James had parked on one of the streets adjacent to Magazine Street in Uptown to get lunch at a Vietnamese restaurant. He insisted they eat before they made the drop. Isabelle had looked back at the car, slightly concerned they were walking away with that window rolled down.

"Aren't you afraid someone's going to steal your car? With that window opened?"

James had covered the paintings with a large blue tarp, so you couldn't see them from outside.

"Nah," James had said, taking a quick backwards glance.

“Tell me something. Are the paintings inside worth more than the car itself?” Isabelle had asked, slightly frowning, as they carried on walking.

“Way more. Maybe four times the worth of the car. Each.” James had added in a hushed voice as to not draw attention to the car they were leaving. “But I’ve covered them, so it’s fine. No one’s going to know they’re there.”

When they’d gotten back from that first trip, Isabelle had bought a dozen car fresheners and strategically placed them all over the vehicle’s interior. She hadn’t been able to stop herself, thinking it might’ve been slightly neurotic of her to take such liberty, but she needed to do something about that car if she was to ride in it again. The air fresheners helped a little with the smell, but only partially, since it seemed James was never going to properly clean it.

Earlier that morning as they were heading back to New Orleans to drop her off there for a couple of weeks, Isabelle had found a banana peel by the gearshift.

“What the fuck?” Isabelle had asked, having decided a few weeks back that there was no need for coddling anymore, now openly showing how annoyed she was by his sloppiness. “How long has this been here?” She had carried on with an accusatory tone, picking up the rotten fruit peel with the tip of her two fingers, pinching her nose.

“Mm,” James had said quizzically, frowning a little, though unmoved by her use of profanity. For weeks now, Isabelle had been showing him her true colours as an incorrigible foul mouth, so he was used to it.

He had seemed to have genuinely forgotten. Exasperated, she had thrown it away. After giving a quick glance at the backseat area, she’d found more empty fast-food

wrappers. Cursing under her breath, she threw them away too. Then she'd swung her heavy luggage out back, and they had hit the road for New Orleans.

As James drove onto I-10, the view of the Atchafalaya was eventually blocked by cypress trees covered in Spanish moss. The plants looked like old men's beards, which apparently had been where their name had come from. It seemed conquistadors had left shaving blades at home when they had disembarked in Louisiana.

As they were getting closer to Baton Rouge, James began on how he had opened his art collective, NUNU, in Arnaudville almost ten years ago. His father, James Sr., had fallen ill so James had moved back from Baton Rouge where he had been a well-established artist. Not long after the move, his father passed away at St. Luc's, the local hospital. His mother—who all the volunteers affectionately called Ms. Jo—had started to show signs of depression by the loss of her husband, so James had decided to stay longer. He ended up never leaving again.

Being openly gay in a small town in rural Louisiana already took guts, but opening an art collective and making waves in the local political scene was on a different level.

“I had help, no questions asked. It's a collective, after all. Volunteer-based involvement only.”

Local politicians had been out to undermine him at every turn, but James had chosen to join the fold instead of trying to fight it, signing up for the Chamber of Commerce, attending municipal meetings. He had taken Isabelle to a few of them since her arrival several weeks before. She had been curious to see how melodramatic it could get in Louisianan town halls. The times she had been present, even what appeared as

insignificant turf wars had gotten quickly out of hand. Maybe the crushing heat didn't help with everyone's mood.

James was telling her about the perks of having his collective in a rural area, but she wasn't convinced. Originally from a small village back in Quebec, Isabelle would never move back, especially not to open an art collective. She'd left that life behind without regrets. She told him so as the wind blew her bob haircut around, held in place only by her fedora.

Montreal was her home now.

The car rolled onto the large cantilevered Horace Wilkinson Bridge, which crossed over the Mississippi River into Baton Rouge. The city was covered in dark greenery, maybe compensating for being home to one of the largest oil refineries in the country. On the near horizon, to their left, the beige State Capitol rose, its austere main tower with black-tarnished window frames a little over twenty floors tall. Very Soviet Union for such a conservative stronghold, she pointed out to James, who burst out laughing.

"Only a Canadian could think that this place's anywhere near being a communist nest," James said.

"Well, don't you agree?" she asked.

"It was built in the 30s, so it sorta makes sense. In terms of architecture, it was pretty common."

While he continued heading south on I-10 through Baton Rouge, James further shared his vision for NUNU. Discussions about funding the arts in Louisiana always involved politics to some degree, and James had become quite a skilled fundraiser for his

collective. However, he hammered it down on everyone that there would be no gossiping or political debates within the walls of NUNU, especially since the election of Trump.

Truth be told, James was the biggest gossip of them all, Isabelle had noticed only after a few days. He would wait to be outside the place to have a go at it. Isabelle loved small town gossip, especially in America. Disagreements always seemed worse than they actually were. But James genuinely saw the best in people and was quite inclusive. Although a Democrat, he welcomed even conservatives. His rules regarding gossiping and politics were just to prevent people from fighting within the walls of NUNU. It was a sacred place for him, a second home.

When she arrived at NUNU in April, James entrusted her with only one mission:

“Talk to people. In French, as much as possible.”

“I can do that in my sleep,” she said, making him smile on that first day.

However, she would soon come to realize it wouldn't be as easy as she had thought.

First of all, the French was not at all the same. She'd heard about Cajun French and had expected it to resemble what she'd been used to back home in Quebec. But then, some volunteers told her that some of them spoke Creole, and others, Cajun French, making it a chaotic environment for her to navigate. In Isabelle's mind—and maybe to a lot of other Quebecers as well—Creole was a language mainly used by Haitians, including the large diaspora living in Montreal. It would never occur to her that both white and black Louisianans would speak a form of it. She had assumed, maybe naively, that everyone in Acadiana spoke like the folk singer Zachary Richard.

“*Ki ça t'apé di?*” Ms. Jo had asked, confused, when Isabelle pronounced Richard’s name the first time.

Although the famous French-speaking Louisianan singer was a local celebrity, if Isabelle said his name with rough guttural ‘r’, no one at the collective knew who she was referring to. For them, he was just good old chummy Zachary; whereas to Isabelle, and most French-Canadians, Richard was a musical legend, filling the largest stadiums when he, a living symbol of French resistance, visited Quebec. All that was missing for Richard to be worshipped even more by Quebecers was an exposed breast and a blue and white fleur-de-lis flag.

After a few weeks, she’d come to hear similarities between Louisiana versions of French and her former rural French-Canadian lingo. Throughout the decade she’d lived in Montreal and worked in the literary field, Isabelle had felt pressured to speak in a more refined way, polishing her Quebecer accent, giving it a slight European lilt noticeable at times to keen ears. But, that ‘international French’ was no way near what Louisianans were used to, forcing her to adjust not only her pace, but also her choice of words.

She had always been aggravated when European French-speakers ridiculed French-Canadians for their accent, saying they didn’t speak ‘real’ French—Parisians even liked to pretend they didn’t understand Quebecers—but now, Isabelle was facing a similar linguistic barrier with Louisianans. Even if she didn’t want to, she ended up switching to English with most of them.

Ironically for such a proud defender of the French language, Isabelle had made significant effort to improve her English throughout the years. Her accent even resembled that of Acadiana. She’d spent a school year in Texas, almost fifteen years prior now, and



this experience had left traces of a twang, which she had also tried to suppress once back in Quebec. But now, the accent was resurfacing in a hybrid form, as Isabelle had a tendency to pick up and imitate people's accents pretty quickly.

But that wasn't what James wanted from her. He needed a mouthpiece, someone to advocate for French revival in Acadiana and the importance of French-English bilingualism in local youth. And as a bilingual French-Canadian thirty-one-year-old woman, Isabelle was a perfect poster child.

Quebec had struggled to keep its language alive, but this had been a battle of the past, now mostly won. Some hardcore French-language activists might disagree, preferring to shame bilingual Quebec youth by calling them *assimilés* if they didn't flip tables for being addressed in the 'oppressor's tongue' even in the few predominantly English-speaking neighbourhoods of Montreal.

Compared to French in Quebec though, the language in Louisiana was more timidly celebrated, and according to James, needed strong advocates.

"Like yourself," James had been telling Isabelle for the past six weeks, and repeated as they drove out of Baton Rouge city limits.

"I'll do my best."

"Oh, by the way, did you get a chance to see Michelle before we left? She was looking for you," James said.

"Yeah, she wanted to hug me goodbye."

Michelle, a volunteer at NUNU, had picked her up at the Lafayette Regional Airport back in April. She was a tall slender African-American woman, and had stood

straight in the middle of the baggage claim area, looking up at the escalators when Isabelle spotted her.

The woman, mid-sixties, had not needed to hold up a sign; Isabelle had known right away she was her ride. The woman had been wearing ample floaty clothing in earth tones, much like a bohemian. She had long, refined dreadlocks past her shoulders, with almost two inches shaved above her right ear. When Isabelle had gotten closer, she had noticed a little bright yellow paint in her hair, making it almost unnecessary to ask if she was with the art collective.

The woman had tilted her head in a silent yes, then had asked Isabelle if she'd had a good trip down from Montreal. Her voice was the low-key kind, harsh, almost masculine—a bit like Nina Simone's—but she spoke with warmth while they walked to the carousel for Isabelle to recover her luggage.

They had walked back to Michelle's 1993 Ford Flareside pickup truck. It was in pristine condition, inside out, with white paint and thin blue stripes on the side. A dark red leather bench was the seating arrangement inside. They had gone around the truck for Isabelle to swing her heavy luggage onto the open cargo area.

On the way back, they had talked a bit, but it was only a few weeks later that Isabelle had truly fell in love with the woman. That day, the woman had barged into NUNU, clearly pissed about something. Isabelle had timidly asked her what the matter was, and Michelle had told her about her very painful physiotherapy session at the local health center.

“Is that the one with those three *fucking* large crosses on the front yard? What's up with that?” Isabelle had asked.

Michelle had stopped mid-motion, and looked at her intently. There was an awkward pause. At first, Isabelle had tried to subdue her cursing in public, but the more she had tried, the less natural she had felt. She wasn't sure if she had insulted Michelle by cursing openly, and if she needed to apologize or something.

“Yeah...they want you to suck it up. Look at what Jesus had to go through. Well, I ain't going back. *Fuck* that,” Michelle had said before making her way to her framing shop area at the back of NUNU.

From then on, Michelle had seemed to adopt her as her swear buddy. But Michelle was much more than just a foul mouth, she was also extremely caring, and treated Isabelle almost like a little sister. The woman was loyal to her adopted community, having recently moved to Arnaudville after years of involvement with NUNU from a distance, finally deciding it was time to get closer and invest more of her time for the collective to flourish.

It had been a relief to Isabelle to finally find someone like Michelle in the small rural town who appreciated not only her dark humour, but who wasn't offended at hearing crude words coming out in such a well-imitated Louisiana-Texan accent.

But winning over James had taken more work. The day following her arrival, Isabelle had shown up at the collective in a dark blue polka dot dress with a large red leather belt, while wearing her signature beige fedora with its bright orange ribbon. Upon seeing her, James had simply stared, not hiding his surprise at such attire for rural Louisiana. He had sworn throughout the following weeks that he hadn't been thrown off by her appearance that day. He had only been unsure if the volunteers would react well to her style, a bit fancy in his opinion.

“I was afraid you’d be snooty,” James said as he drove on I-10.

“Thanks! I hope I didn’t disappoint!” Isabelle said, making him laugh.

For Montrealers, it was an occupational hazard to come off as snobbish; they did have a reputation, especially in the rest of their own province, for being condescending. Isabelle might’ve come off that way, but she chose to ignore the comment, because it wasn’t true. Besides, in Arnaudville, she had known right away who she needed in her corner to fit in the volunteers’ group: Ms. Jo, James’ mother, a feisty petite eighty-year-old Creole-speaker. She was the key to NUNU, the heart of the collective. During Isabelle’s first week, James had often caught them speaking English with one another, and playfully ordered her to switch to French with his mama.

“It’s not even the same language. But we’ll try, promise,” Isabelle had said.

Finally, after miles of forests surrounding both sides, I-10 suddenly opened to another large water body on their left, Lake Pontchartrain. A row of tall electric poles was situated a little off the coast, ruining the view a bit. The right side of the bridge was surrounded by sparse trees that looked dead, but that weren’t dying. James insisted, when she made the observation. Isabelle looked out as New Orleans finally came on the horizon. She held on to her fedora as a burst of wind came rushing into the car. The city was still very small in the distance, but they were getting closer.

“By the way, what am I to do in New Orleans for the next two weeks or so?”

“Whatever Scott needs you to do.”

Scott was the jazz museum director in New Orleans, and he was a disorganized guy too, James mentioned. Things in his office were run pretty much like they were at the

collective in Arnaudville, which meant Isabelle would need to be extremely flexible and understanding if things changed sporadically throughout the day.

When she first heard Scott's name, Isabelle had a knee-jerk reaction. She had known another Scott back home. A previous boss. Who had betrayed her on his way out of town.

"But he fell *in love* with you when we drove down the first time, and now he can't shut up about having you over," James said.

"Hey! It's not impossible to love me, ok?"

James hadn't been able to push back her stay in New Orleans, nor her work alongside Scott at the museum. Isabelle was halfway through the internship and James was going away on a business trip to Georgia to deliver several paintings. It was actually perfect timing for James to drive her down there on that day, even if housing hadn't been figured out yet. Scott had agreed to find a more permanent solution for her soon enough.

So far, only Dana Saulnier, a friend of the collective in Arnaudville, had agreed to take her for the first couple of nights. After that, it hadn't been decided where Isabelle would go. Maybe another artists' collective, Scott had suggested via email the week before. Isabelle had been concerned about this evasive response, wanting to plan ahead more.

As James drove on, he asked, "Have you thought about what I asked you?"

"Yeah and no."

During their first meeting together when she'd arrived from Montreal, he had asked what she was looking for in this internship. She had too much experience to be seeking new professional knowledge. But she had applied nonetheless, having found

nothing better to do back home after her contract wasn't renewed. On that first day, she had given him a smirk before answering, "I'm not even sure what I'm doing here." He had grinned back, satisfied by her honesty.

She had spent weeks trying to figure out an answer, just to give up on that too.

He didn't pressure her further on the subject, "You gotta start trusting the process," James said. "This is Louisiana. You can't plan too much ahead of time. It just can't be done. You just gotta wing it most of the time."

"That's pretty ironic for an event-planning internship."

"Oh well," James said, looking out the window. He seemed to want to change the subject.

Although Isabelle might've been right about the paradox, she knew nothing would change. She'd discovered pretty quickly after her arrival that it was pointless to try to make her own notion of time fit to that of the South. Time might have been money up North, but it was leisure down South, and she better get used to it.

Yes, indeed, *laissez les bons temps rouler*. Let the good times roll.

Even that expression wouldn't be considered 'proper French' by 'international French' standards, but Isabelle had not dared say anything about it, because *that* would've truly been patronising. Besides, she knew better than to barge in and just criticize how locals spoke; she'd been on the receiving end of that for years back home with the flock of Parisians who'd invaded Montreal's now overrated Plateau neighbourhood.

Dana Saulnier and Isabelle had not officially met, but James was sure they would get along right away. Saulnier's parents lived in Sunset, a fifteen-minute drive from

Arnaudville, and they were often at the collective. Their youngest daughter, Dana, had been living in New Orleans for a couple of years now. She was very interested in the French revival, being of Cajun descent herself, but like James, she struggled to speak the language with her elders.

Isabelle was nervous to finally meet Dana Saulnier. She'd seen her at the collective during *Semaine de la Francophonie*—French Week—but it had been Isabelle's first week at NUNU. She hadn't dared go up to the other girl after hearing her speak so eloquently during a panel discussion on strategies for French revival in Louisiana. Saulnier had been impressive not only in wits, but also in height, as she had towered over everyone at 6'4".

James talked as they entered New Orleans, taking an overpass next to the Superdome. Large screens along the highway on the way to town announced upcoming shows at the stadium. The large facility seemed untarnished, as if unweathered, almost polished. Isabelle stared at the building, nodding absentmindedly as James told her that Scott would make her feel welcome in New Orleans.

Tomorrow was going to be June 1<sup>st</sup>, and hurricane season would officially start. Isabelle mentioned this to James, out of the blue, sounding more worried than she'd intended.

“Well, that should be the least of your worries in New Orleans,” James said laughing, though Isabelle wasn't sure if he had been kidding or not.

# Résonance

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Volume 2

Article 13

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2020

## Cajun Crabs

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### Recommended Citation

Boucher, Marc T. (2020) "Cajun Crabs," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/13>

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## Cajun Crabs

by Marc T. Boucher

“Caitie! Go check your goddamn lines! That’s why we’re here, ‘member?”

Caitlyn Arceneaux keeps reading her book for a few moments before looking up from her lawn chair, a sign to her older brother that, at eleven years old, she does not enjoy his constant orders. Eamon glares at her while he waits, breathing his impatience loudly through his nose, much like he has done most of the morning.

“*Diary of a Wimpy Kid*,” she finally says slowly, drawing it out. “*Dog Days*. The one I got last week for my birthday. Really funny, *cher*.”

“Well, read at home, *’ti Bougre!* We gotta get crabs for dinner. Shit, Caitie!” He suddenly smirks, “Gonna tell ‘Daddykins’ that I swore again?” Caitlyn gives him a practised eye-roll, and mumbles, “This’s all so boring.”

She is still miffed by the crabbing lesson she had to endure only three hours ago, meted out like a punishment by her abrasive fourteen-year-old brother. He was getting worse, especially when he was left “in charge,” like he was today. After smiles and hugs, Caitie and Eamon had watched their parents leave in their boat, *Geaux Arceneaux Geaux* written across the back. They waved over the noise of the engine, promising to return with black drum and largemouth bass, both plentiful in the Rockefeller Refuge in southwest Louisiana. Not surprisingly, Eamon’s alter ego, always lurking just below the surface, soon emerged, the bully reserved for his sister and her friends. The transformation was almost complete even before the sound of the motor had faded away.

“Listen up kid! We got work to do.” Formal, like a drill sergeant, every word just a little too loud. “First, we need to cut this string into pieces ‘bout twenty feet long, an’ we need twelve of them. Think you can do that all by yourself?” He scowls as he hands her a ball of butcher twine and a pair of scissors. Caitie ignores the tone, tired of bickering with her brother. “Okay, get started,” he adds, almost yelling. “I’m gonna get some stones, and bring back the chicken legs from the cooler.”

Caitie waits until he leaves, and measures out one full length of string. With that as a guide, she has them all cut before Eamon returns. He seems somewhat

disappointed that she's succeeded, and begrudgingly counts out half of the pieces. "Okay, we each got six. You're gonna have to set up your own lines, so watch me. An' you'll have to look after them too. So don't get caught up in that stupid book!"

He ties a first string to one of the dozen stones he has placed on the pier, all in a row about three feet apart, four feet back from the edge of the concrete landing. "Watching me? I only wanna show you once!" He then ties a raw chicken leg to the unattached end of the line. Peering down to the murky water five feet below, he drops his tethered bait, losing sight of it almost immediately as it sinks six or seven feet below the surface.

"Okay, that's it. Simple enough? Even for you?" He looks over, a malevolent grin distorting his face. "Those're your stones over there, so do the same thing with the other lines." Caitlyn hesitates for just a second, enough to spark a predictable reaction from her brother. "Hey don't worry, they can't bite – or even kick!" He explodes in a harsh laugh. "They're legs, get it?"

Caitlyn decides not to respond, to remind him that she and Mum are the ones who prepare most of their Bar-B-Qs, while he's throwing the football with Dad. She quickly sets up her six lines, a little intrigued by the process, but unwilling to ask questions, knowing that they would only become the source of more derision by Eamon. She finally sits down in her chair, and opens her book. Within minutes, Eamon summons her, deciding to make a first check of his lines.

"Okay, kid, get over here. Watch me. This's how you need to check your lines for crab, and it's easier with two people. Ya ready?" He begins to pull up one of his strings slowly, staring intently at the line where it enters the water, trying to glimpse the chicken leg before it breaks the surface. "You gotta pull your line up real slow, until you can see whether there's a crab biting on the chicken, just holding on. That's what they do." Caitlyn leans over the water to look.

"Wow, look at that! Got one hanging on!" He's now excited. "See it?! It's biting on the chicken. Get the net quick!" Caitlyn picks up the two-foot hoop net, attached to a ten-foot aluminum handle, and stands beside her brother.

"You gotta be careful not to pull the chicken up too fast, or yank it out of the water. The crab'll just let go, and fall back in." He concentrates on his line while

speaking. “Ya gotta hurry! Now hold the handle, and slip the net into the water under the chicken. Ready? When I jerk the line, the crab’s gonna fall right into the net – dinner!”

Caitlyn lowers the net into the water, and positions the hoop about one foot below the chicken. “Okay, bring it up slowly. Keep it under the chicken, Caitie!” he yells. “Okay, I’m gonna pull the line out o’ the water.”

Within seconds, the crab falls squirming into the net, and they have a first contribution to their Cajun dinner. It’s exhilarating in a way, and totally novel for Caitlyn. Eamon carries his catch to the cooler, holding it like a sacred blessing, part of a communion rite. He places it tenderly on the bag of crushed ice, ecstatic, maybe even a little nicer, forgetting why he needs to be a bully. “See that? Pretty simple. You can do it easy. And when there’s a crab on your line, I’ll get the net. All set?”

She catches on quickly, and within hours, they collect over twenty crabs between them. For Caitlyn, however, the excitement soon dissipates, and the process becomes boring and routine. Much to Eamon’s frustration, she checks her lines less and less often, and even takes time from her seductive book to bask in the colourful world around her.

She has never before seen so many different kinds of birds together, some circling overhead, others chatting from the trees, most hoping for a free meal. The gulls strut on the landing, screeching their direct orders, spoiled by the many returning fishermen who deliver the precious guts of their cleaned catch. Only a few feet away, the turkey vultures and ravens look on, apparently able to contain their hunger with more patience and dignity. On the opposite shore of the little inlet, a few alligators are basking in the sun, bulls and cows together, gaping, their mouths wide open, trying to remain cool. There is even a small one on their own side of the water, not far from the dock. It has moved once, but at less than three feet long, it is really too small to be considered a threat.

Caitlyn checks her lines ostentatiously before Eamon can slide into another moment of uncontrolled apoplexy, providing stressful entertainment for the many living creatures at the Rockefeller Refuge. She finally settles down with the *Wimpy Kid* in her comfortable lawn chair, giggling aloud at some of the hilarious

predicaments Greg Heffley must endure with his older brother Roderick...he reminds her of her own. She reads fewer than three pages when Eamon suddenly summons her in a high-pitched call, excited and nervous, all in a tone she has not heard before.

“Caitie! Come here! Quick! I got something HUGE on the line!” Caitlyn runs over, grabbing the net as Eamon slowly draws up his string, the line taut and vibrating. She stands next to him, positioned to lower the net. “Christ! This is really massive!” He continues to pull slowly, bent over, staring intently at the water five feet below, totally absorbed in trying to see what he has snagged. Within seconds, the nose of a very young alligator breaks the water, its genetic smile in full display, the entire chicken leg in its mouth, a toy more than a meal.

Eamon groans, as though he’s being attacked, “UNNGGHH!” Petrified and confused, he loses control of his bladder, his denim shorts quickly transforming into a darker shade of shimmering blue. He is still staring down when the alligator releases the chicken, slowly ducking back into the water, oblivious to the mayhem he has just caused. Eamon drops the line with the mangled piece of chicken, the spell broken.

Still rattled, he looks down at his wet shorts, trying to process it all, a growing awareness of the spectacle he must present. He looks over at Caitlyn, blushing, tears rolling down his cheeks, a release from the intense trauma of the past two minutes. There is total silence, except for the sound of slowly dripping urine staining Eamon’s Air Jordans.

“That was scary,” whispers Caitlyn, still in a state of mild shock. She puts her hand on Eamon’s arm. “Really scary, Eamon.” She glances down at his shorts, and then at his face, humiliated and embarrassed. He begins to turn away, bracing himself for the derision he would have surely lined up for her. “I know...I’m a *vrai couillion*”

“You just need to get cleaned up.” She looks down to the trees at the end of the landing, only fifty feet away. “Mum and Dad won’t be back for at least an hour.” She drops the net onto the landing, and removes her floppy pink shorts, the ones her mother had thrown to her from the boat that morning, insisting that she wear them over her bathing suit. She suddenly remembers her brother sneering at her for “trying to look like Mum,” now wearing her mother’s new Nike shorts, bought at the Acadiana Mall that very morning.

“Here, put these on. I’ll rinse your clothes, and let them dry them on the bushes. Won’t take long in this sun.”

She smiles over at him for the first time. “Nobody has to know.” She begins to leave, and turns around to face him, not used to seeing her brother speechless. “I’ll take the lines in, okay? I mean, we’ve already got twenty, that’s great! Everybody’ll be happy.” And I can get back to my book, she thought.

She is retrieving her third line before Eamon, motionless since the alligator disappeared, begins to shuffle to the end of the dock. “Thanks,” he mumbles through snuffles.

Minutes later, she retrieves Eamon’s wet clothes, and goes to the other end of the dock near the trees, where she will be able to hang them on one of the many cypress shrubs. As she is rinsing them, she smiles to herself, and works with a new intensity. She lays Eamon’s underwear on some lower branches, and looks over at her brother, staring off into the distance in his new pink shorts. She fills the pockets of his denims with several large stones, and lets them slide into the water, lost forever to the land of the marauding alligators.

She walks back toward Eamon. “Sure is getting windy. Your clothes are on that last bush. Should be dry before Mum and Dad get back.”

2020

## Mariage dans les nuages

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### Recommended Citation

Perreault, Robert B. (2020) "Mariage dans les nuages," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/14>

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## MARIAGE DANS LES NUAGES

par  
Robert B. Perreault

— À Pierre Anctil

— Laisse faire. Tu t’en rappelleras même pas le jour de ton mariage.

Voilà ce que me disait ma mère à chaque fois que, alors tout petit pendant les années 1950, je me râpais un genou en tombant. Ou à l’école primaire, lorsque nous recevions nos bulletins de notes, plutôt que premier comme d’habitude, j’étais classé deuxième en français. Et enfin, devenu adolescent, je me faisais rejeter par une jeune fille sans l’amour de qui je ne pensais pouvoir continuer de vivre.

Avançons rapidement à l’année 1981. Le grand jour arrivé, je me retrouve ce soir avec mon ami, Simon, à l’entrée du presbytère Notre-Dame, où nous venons de sonner.

— Bonsoir ma soeur, je dis à la religieuse qui répond à la porte. S’il vous plaît, nous aimerions voir l’abbé Damase Sansouci.

— Ça m’fait ben d’la peine, messieurs, mais on dérange pas le père Sansouci. I’ a besoin d’la paix pis d’la tranquillité pour l’inspiration quan’qu’i’ compose ses rimettes.

Avec un petit sourire, elle lève les yeux en indiquant du doigt vers le haut.

— C’est pour ça qu’sa chambre est au troisième plancher, tout à fait dans les nuages.

Je me gratte la tête en me retournant vers Simon. Son sourire moqueur me dit qu’il sait à quoi je pense—*un poète avec la tête dans les nuages*—puisque nous possédons tous les deux des exemplaires des volumes de poésies du père Sansouci qu’il nous a dédiés personnellement.

Ensuite, je me retourne vers la religieuse.

— Pardonnez-moi ma soeur, mais il est six heures et quart, puis je dois me marier à sept heures. L'église est fermée et le monde va commencer à arriver bientôt.

La religieuse promène son regard de la tête aux pieds sur Simon et moi—lui vêtu de son costume bleu d'Yves Saint-Laurent, moi dans le mien, blanc et semblable à celui que porte John Lennon sur la photo de couverture de l'album *Abbey Road* des Beatles.

— J'voué ben c'que vous vous voulez dire, messieurs, mais j'vous assure que vous vous trompez de date. Y pas d'mariage icitte ce soir.

Un colosse de descendance viking mesurant six pieds, trois pouces, Simon se penche vers la religieuse, qui rejoint à peine sa poitrine.

— Excusez-moi ma soeur, mais j'ai mis plus de six heures de route entre Montréal et ici. Ma femme enceinte crevait de chaleur, puis notre petit gars de trois ans n'arrêtait pas de brâiller pendant qu'on faisait la queue qui s'étendait jusqu'au Pôle Nord pour passer aux douanes des États-Unis.

Mettant la main sur mon épaule, Simon continue:

— Je suis venu ici pour servir de témoin au mariage de mon ami. Je vous assure, ma soeur, que nous avons la bonne date.

Je hoche la tête en accord avec Simon.

— I' fa' pas si chaud qu'ça au Pôle Nord, la religieuse nous répond.

*Ô, qu'elle a du culot, celle-là*, me dis-je à moi-même. Cependant, je lui souris en plein visage.

— S'il vous plaît, ma soeur.

De nouveau, la religieuse regarde en haut et pousse un soupir.

— Ça m'coûte beaucoup de l'déranger.



Ensuite, sortant sur la véranda, la soeur ferme la porte du presbytère, après quoi elle fouille sa poche pour produire un trousseau de clés.

— J’suis pas rien qu’la réceptionniste, j’suis la sacristine étou, dit-elle avec un air déterminé. Allons voir c’qui s’passe.

Traversant le parvis, nous nous présentons. Je lui dis que je m’appelle Paul Xavier et que mon ami s’appelle Simon LeNormand.

— Moué, mon nom c’est soeur Victoria.

— Ma mère s’appelle Victoria, je lui réponds. C’est un joli nom.

— Merci beaucoup. Vous êtes gentil. Et puis, ça fait comment longtemps que vous vivez icitte dans le New-Hampshire, monsieur Xavier?

— Depuis toute ma vie. Je suis né ici à Sagamore Falls.

— Ben, voyons donc.

Elle me regarde en montrant Simon du doigt.

— La manière que vous parlez français, j’étais certaine que vous étiez du Canada comme monsieur LeNormand icitte. Vous m’faissez honte, moué pis mon jargon de Bordenville, Massachusetts. J’suis une des seules religieuses de notre ordre qui est pas venue au monde en Canada. Le père Sansouci est toujours après m’corriger mon français.

Rendus à la sacristie de l’église Notre-Dame, la paroisse natale de ma fiancée, Muriel, nous attendons que soeur Victoria vérifie l’horaire des offices religieux de la semaine. Simon regarde partout, car même la sacristie de cette église néo-gothique évoque, sur une échelle moins grande, la splendeur des plus beaux temples du Québec ainsi que celle des cathédrales de France. D’ailleurs, c’est un des seuls lieux de culte de l’ère victorienne à Sagamore Falls ayant préservé son décor original.

— Laissez-moué voir, dit soeur Victoria. Vendredi, le trente-et-un juillet, sept heures du soir. Mariage: Paul André Xavier et Muriel Aurore Trudel.

Bouche bée, les yeux tout grand ouverts, la main bien posée à la joue, soeur Victoria rougit et crie.

— Ô mon Dieu—j’veux dire—

Elle fait un signe de croix.

— J’prends pas l’nom du bon Dieu en vain. J’ai vraiment besoin d’invoquer son aide. Comment qu’j’ai pu manquer ça? J’suis tellement embarrassée. J’m’excuse.

Elle relit l’horaire, voulant se rassurer de l’avoir bien compris.

— Coudon, Muriel Trudel. Ses parents font-tu des rimettes eux autres étou?

Je me fais un portrait du père Sansouci enfoui dans sa cellule céleste, trempant sa plume d’oie dans un encrier cristallin pour composer ses vers fleuris dans une écriture boursouflée sur du papier vélin. *Les parents de Muriel des poètes?* Décidément pas comme celui-ci.

— C’était l’idée de sa mère, je dis à soeur Victoria. Elle adore jouer avec les mots pour faire rire le monde. C’est une originale.

Soeur Victoria fait la moue.

— C’est-tu donc *cute*, dit-elle d’un ton sarcastique.

Ensuite, elle fronce les sourcils.

— En toués cas, messieurs, ça m’fait ben d’la peine, mais pour sauver du temps, j’doué vous demander de préparer queuques p’tites choses.

Elle nous donne un ordre après l’autre en nous montrant où se trouve tout ce qu’il nous faut.

— Habillés comme vous l'êtes, va fouaire que vous prenez garde de pas vous salir.

La colère monte en moi lorsque je songe à l'absurdité de me voir, moi le marié, obligé de préparer l'église pour mon propre mariage avec l'aide de mon témoin. Je ne peux pas croire que tout cela se passe véritablement. S'il s'agissait au moins d'un cauchemar, je pourrais me réveiller et retrouver le soulagement.

— En attendant, dit soeur Victoria, moué m'as r'tourner au presbytère pour avertir le père Sansouci.

En prononçant le nom du prêtre-poète, elle roule des yeux.

— I' faut étou que j'appelle le bedeau pour venir débarrer toutes les portes pis mettre les lumières. J'espère qu'i' est chez eux un vendredi soir.

Voyant soeur Victoria sur le point de partir, il me vient quelque chose à l'idée.

— Ma soeur, en sortant, si vous voyez arriver une vieille Ford Pinto blanche toute rouillée avec un moteur qui fait beaucoup de bruit et de la fumée noire sortant de son tuyau d'échappement, s'il vous plaît, dites au chauffeur de venir directement à la sacristie. C'est lui qui va nous marier.

Soeur Victoria a l'air perplexe.

— Mais, c'est pas le père Sansouci qui va ...?

— Je regrette, ma soeur. J'aurais dû vous le dire.

J'explique à soeur Victoria qu'un de nos amis, Gérard Therrien, séminariste dans le Massachusetts—de fait, il est diacre—va nous marier. Mais puisqu'un diacre ne peut pas célébrer la messe, le père Marion, curé de Notre-Dame, devait le faire. Cependant, la semaine dernière, celui-ci s'est aperçu d'un conflit. Il devait accompagner ses paroissiens

sur un pèlerinage au sanctuaire de La Salette à Enfield. Par conséquent, il nous avait appelés pour nous dire que le père Sansouci allait le remplacer. Nous n'avions donc aucun autre choix, car il était trop tard.

Selon l'expression dans le visage de soeur Victoria lorsqu'elle se mord la lèvre, il est évident qu'elle est prise quelque part entre la frustration coléreuse et un éclat de rire supprimé.

— J'comprends, dit-elle, sortant en toute vitesse.

Sans perdre un instant, Simon et moi nous mettons à l'oeuvre.

— Tiens, je lui dis, prends un bout de ce prie-Dieu et moi, je prendrai l'autre.

Parce que Simon et moi ne nous voyons que deux ou trois fois par an, et aussi parce que lui et sa famille viennent d'arriver de Montréal tard cet après-midi, nous avons beaucoup de nouvelles à partager. Je n'ai même pas eu l'occasion de lui raconter les détails de comment ce changement récent de prêtre pourrait nous poser un défi. Nous parlons en travaillant.

— Je me demandais comment vous vous étiez fait prendre avec Sansouci, Simon me dit. Maintenant je le sais. Pauvres vous autres.

— T'en sais que la moitié. C'est d'valeur que t'as pas pu avoir congé de ton travail hier, parce que t'as manqué « l'Acte premier » de sa performance hier soir à notre répétition.

— Qu'est-ce qui s'est passé?

Je dis à Simon à quel point le père Sansouci avait été un paquet de nerfs, étant arrivé en retard. Son excuse était qu'il avait passé plusieurs heures à retrouver la version française du rituel de mariage. Apparemment, nous sommes le premier couple depuis

quelques décennies à vouloir nous marier en français. De plus, parce que Gérard ne pouvait pas se rendre à la répétition, le père Sansouci a repassé la cérémonie entière, étape par étape, nous décrivant, comme si nous étions des enfants, comment faire notre entrée dans l'église, comment et quand nous mettre debout, nous asseoir, nous mettre à genoux et ainsi de suite.

— Il a rendu Françoise et son ami fous.

— Ta soeur? Pourquoi est-ce qu'elle y était? Et avec son ami?

— Ils vous ont remplacés, toi et Sylvia Pinard, la fille d'honneur. Elle aussi, il fallait qu'elle travaille. Mais c'est pas toute l'histoire. Quand on a répété nos voeux, le père Sansouci nous a arrêtés pour nous dire: « À ce moment-ci, si vous vous sentez bien tous les deux à propos de votre mariage, vous répondrez *oui*. Mais si l'un ou l'autre ou bien vous deux, vous avez des doutes, vous direz *non*. On arrêtera la cérémonie et tout le monde rentrera chez eux ».

Simon s'arrête en plein milieu du sanctuaire et manque de laisser tomber la chaise qu'il porte.

— Ça s peut pas. T'as dû mal comprendre. Ou bien il plaisantait. Aucun prêtre de normal dirait une telle chose à un couple sur le point de se marier—surtout pendant la répétition pour leur mariage.

En marchant à côté de Simon, je m'arrête et je place ma chaise à terre.

— Simon, j'pourrais pas être plus sérieux, et lui non plus.

Je révèle à Simon un fait que moi-même je viens tout juste d'apprendre.

— Le père Sansouci fait partie du tribunal des annulations de mariages pour le diocèse. Il sait comment l'Église met les couples à l'épreuve avant de leur accorder une

annulation—*si* même elle leur en accorde. Il se peut que ce soit sa logique bizarre, sa façon de pousser les couples à considérer ce qu'ils sont sur le point de faire avant qu'il soit trop tard.

— Je suppose que rien de ce que tu me dis devrait me surprendre. Te souviens-tu l'année dernière, quand Sansouci m'avait *donné*, devant toi, un exemplaire de son histoire de la paroisse Notre-Dame?

La question de Simon me rappelle que le père Sansouci m'avait demandé vingt dollars pour un exemplaire de son livre au moment de sa publication. Cependant, le tirage unique presque épuisé, il n'avait demandé aucun sou à Simon, lui donnant un des quelques rares invendus. Croyant m'appaiser, il avait signé l'exemplaire de Simon: *À mes amis, Simon LeNormand et Paul Xavier ....*

— C'est bien ce jour-là qu'il nous laissait aucun doute qu'il avait la tête dans les nuages, je dis à Simon.

Après quelques minutes, en allumant les cierges sur l'autel, Simon se tourne vers moi.

— Si vous avez eu votre répétition hier soir, comment se fait-il que personne ici à la paroisse ait été au courant de votre mariage ce soir?

— J'm'excuse. J'ai oublié de mentionner ce que le père Sansouci nous a dit avant de partir hier soir. Il a dit: « Je vous verrai dans une semaine de demain ». Muriel et moi avons crié poliment: « Non, mon père, notre mariage aura lieu *demain* soir, pas dans une semaine de demain ». Il avait pas l'air convaincu. À y repenser, j'aurais dû téléphoner au presbytère aujourd'hui pour me rassurer.

— Mais comme sacristine, soeur Victoria aurait dû en être au courant.

— T'as raison, Simon. Elle est autant à blâmer que lui, mais j'ai l'impression que vivre au jour le jour sous le même toit avec le père Sansouci doit causer beaucoup de confusion dans ce presbytère-là.

De retour à la sacristie avec rien d'autre à faire qu'attendre, Simon et moi nous asseyons côte à côte en silence sur un vieux banc d'église longeant un des murs. Ceci me fait réfléchir, pour ensuite m'inquiéter. Je tente de me calmer, mais dans les circonstances, il est difficile. Plusieurs couples sur le point de se marier sont nerveux, se demandant ce que leur avenir ensemble leur réserve. En ce moment, cependant, je me soucie beaucoup plus de ce qui pourrait—ou ne pourrait pas—arriver d'ici quelques minutes. Je regarde ma montre—sept heures moins vingt-cinq—et je commence à me rouler les pouces.

Simon tend le bras et me saisit les pouces.

— Calme-toi. Ça s'arrangera. En passant, j'savais pas que Muriel avait Aurore comme deuxième prénom. J'imagine qu'on retrouve pas beaucoup de femmes qui se promènent ici et là de nos jours avec le nom Aurore.

La tentative de Simon de me calmer les nerfs en changeant d'à propos ne marchera pas, mais je m'y rends tout de même.

— Ça vient d'une de ses grandes-tantes qui est morte en 1950, un an avant la naissance de Muriel. C'est comme moi. Mon nom du milieu est André, pour un oncle qui est mort six ans avant que je vienne au monde. Je suppose que c'est une manière chez les familles de garder le souvenir de leurs membres disparus.

— Mais au moins André c'est un nom qui appartient autant à notre génération.

Tout à coup, nous nous regardons l'un l'autre lorsqu'une musique douce d'orgue rejoint nos oreilles. Évidemment, le bedeau est arrivé et a ouvert les portes de l'église, ce qui me soulage un peu.

— Ça, c'est mon oncle Jacques, je dis à Simon.

— J'pensais qu'i' était organiste à la paroisse du Précieux-Sang.

Je comprends ce que veut dire Simon, que les organistes d'église sont aussi territoriaux que les chiens lorsqu'ils s'agit de laisser d'autres toucher l'orgue de leur propre église.

— C'est vrai, mais c'est l'ami de l'organiste de Notre-Dame, alors il a reçu une permission spéciale de jouer à notre mariage.

— Comment est-ce qu'i' va depuis avoir pris sa retraite?

Plutôt que répondre à la question de Simon, je me lève pour jeter un coup d'oeil par la porte d'entrée au sanctuaire.

— Les lumières sont allumées et y a un peu d'monde déjà assis dans les bancs, je dis à Simon.

Ensuite, je me demande: *Où est soeur Victoria avec le père Sansouci? Et qu'est-ce qui se passe avec Gérard Therrien?*

Simon me fait signe.

— Viens t'asseoir. Parle-moi de ton oncle Jacques.

De nouveau, j'acquiesce au désir de Simon. Je lui dis que mon oncle est soulagé de ne plus être président du Cercle Champlain, mais qu'il est très affecté par le fait qu'on ne l'ait pas retenu comme directeur du *Courrier canadien d'Amérique* comme on avait permis à mon grand-père de garder ce poste après sa propre retraite de la présidence.



— Et toi? Aimes-tu être directeur du *Courrier*?

— Ça fait seulement quelques mois. La plupart du temps, c'est merveilleux, surtout travailler avec Muriel. T'as vu les changements qu'elle a faits dans la typographie et la mise en pages. Mais ça m'donne aussi des maux d'tête. J'aimerais bien trouver une façon polie de nous débarrasser du père Sansouci. J'sais pas comment mon oncle l'a enduré pendant tant d'années. I' nous envoie des poèmes, et aussitôt que la mise en pages est rendue chez l'imprimeur, i' nous envoie des versions revues et corrigées, insistant qu'on publie celles-là.

— Ça m'fait penser à Balzac, qui apportait des corrections à ses romans. Il rendait les imprimeurs parisiens fous.

— Et tu sais que j'ai invité de nouveaux auteurs à écrire pour nous. Justement, on pourrait bien se servir d'articles de toi. Après tout, t'as vu des articles historiques par notre ami, Gérard Therrien.

Je vérifie encore ma montre. Sept heures moins le quart.

— De fait, il devrait déjà être rendu ici s'il va nous marier. Autrement, on sera pris avec ... non, oublie cette pensée.

Mon impatience s'augmentant avec chaque minute, je vais à l'entrée de côté de l'église pour voir si soeur Victoria et le père Sansouci s'en viennent du presbytère, ou bien si la Pinto de Gérard Therrien serait stationnée dans la rue. Dans l'intervale, Simon se promène vers la porte d'entrée au sanctuaire pour voir ce qui se passe dans l'église. Nous nous rencontrons de nouveau au banc dans la sacristie.

— Aucun signe de soeur Victoria, ni du père Sansouci, ni de Gérard, je dis à Simon.

— Le monde continue d’arriver en petits nombres, Simon me dit. Au moins ton oncle les distrait avec de la musique d’orgue.

— En petits nombres, c’est certain. On a rien que vingt-cinq invités. Tu connais Muriel. Si ça dépendait d’elle, on se marierait dans un confessionnal, nous deux et le prêtre seulement. En passant, as-tu pu voir si Muriel est arrivée?

— Non. La mariée se cache toujours dans le vestibule jusqu’à la dernière minute. Ma montre indique presque sept heures moins cinq.

— Qu’elle soit là ou ailleurs, j’doute qu’elle sache que ça va pas bien. Personne peut l’savoir. Mais avant trop longtemps, i’ vont se demander ce qui se passe.

Simon met la main sur mon épaule.

— Laisse faire. Ça va s’arranger.

Laisse faire. Ces deux mots me rappelle le fameux dicton de ma mère. Le problème c’est que cette fois, je m’en souviendrai justement parce que c’est le jour de mon mariage.

— J’en peux plus.

Je me lève.

— J’m’en retourne au presbytère, voir c’qui s’passe.

En ouvrant la porte de côté de l’église, je manque de rentrer dans soeur Victoria, qui me regarde et lève les yeux vers le ciel, comme si en prière elle veut dire: « Dieu aidez-nous ». Derrière elle, le père Sansouci entre en traînant les pieds avec une expression de point d’interrogation dans le visage qui semble vouloir dire: « Ton mariage n’a-t-il pas lieu vendredi *prochain*? » Et, soufflant et haletant en montant les marches extérieures, arrive Gérard.

— Bonsoir monsieur Xavier, monsieur LeNormand, dit le père Sansouci d'une voix tremblante. Je suis désolé, mais ce dérangement n'est pas de ma faute. J'étais convaincu que l'on avait besoin de mes services seulement la semaine prochaine. Le père Marion aurait dû m'en aviser plus clairement avant de partir en pèlerinage.

Je m'avance, presque dans le visage du père Sansouci.

— Mais hier soir après la répétition, on vous a dit—

N'ayant écouté à aucune de mes paroles, il continue:

— Quand la bonne soeur ici m'a dit que votre mariage avait lieu ce soir, j'ai paniqué parce que j'avais oublié où j'avais mis le rituel de mariage en français après la répétition hier soir. Je savais que votre ami, monsieur Therriault, en aurait besoin. Je remercie le bon Dieu que soeur Victoria l'ait trouvé sous une pile de poèmes dans mon étude.

Soeur Victoria me regarde en hochant la tête de droite à gauche.

Retenant ma forte envie de hurler ma colère, je me force à sourire au père Sansouci.

— Disons simplement que je suis content de vous revoir ici, mon père. Et maintenant, pouvez-vous s'il vous plaît vous dépêcher et—

Avant que je puisse finir ma phrase, reprenant souffle, Gérard me tend la main.

— Je regrette, Paul. C'est une longue histoire. En route pour me rendre ici, mon auto a commencé à faire un drôle de bruit et puis—

— Ça va, Gérard, tu t'es rendu. À c't'heure, pourrais-tu s'il te plaît—

Gérard me coupe la parole et se tourne vers le père Sansouci.

— Bonsoir, mon père. Je m'appelle Gérard Therrien, pas Therriault. C'est un honneur de faire la connaissance d'un de nos grands poètes de langue française en Nouvelle-Angleterre, dit-il, lançant un clin d'oeil envers Simon et moi.

Le père Sansouci serre la main de Gérard.

— Ohhhhh, merci beaucoup, monsieur Therrien. Je suis flatté que vous m'adressiez la parole ainsi, surtout que vous soyez vous-même un de nos historiens distingués. J'apprécie beaucoup vos articles dans le *Courrier canadien*.

Simon feint de tousser, ce que j'interprète pour vouloir dire que si le père Sansouci se soit trompé en prononçant le nom de Gérard, il est douteux qu'il lise ses articles. Mais pour l'instant, je veux mettre fin à ces banalités. Je m'approche donc de soeur Victoria en tapant discrètement sur ma montre.

— Excusez-moi, crie-t-elle en levant les mains pour attirer l'attention du père Sansouci et de Gérard. Il est quasiment sept heures. Vous deux, vous pouvez jaser plus tard. Là, c'est l temps de mettre vos vêtements. Moué, m'as m'occuper des vases sacrés pis des autres détails.

Tandis que les autres se mettent à leurs tâches individuelles, Simon retourne au banc d'église au fond de la sacristie. Il me regarde en tapant sur le siège à côté de lui. Je lui répond en me frappant rapidement à la poitrine, lui laissant savoir que mon coeur bat précipitamment et que je suis trop anxieux pour m'asseoir. Au lieu, je marche à pas lents d'un bout à l'autre de la sacristie.

Quelques minutes plus tard, nous avons dépassé les sept heures. Toutes sortes d'images me hante l'esprit. Muriel, qui attend dans le vestibule, se demandant pourquoi le retard. Nos familles et nos amis dans les bancs et à quoi ils doivent penser. Mon oncle

Jacques répétant le même morceau de musique, anticipant un signe que la cérémonie soit sur le point de commencer.

Tout à coup, ma soeur, Françoise, arrive à la sacristie.

— Qu'est-ce qui s'passe? I' est presque sept heures et dix. Le monde commence à grouiller dans leurs bancs.

Ne voulant pas faire une scène, je me précipite vers Françoise pour lui parler tout bas.

— C'est trop compliqué pour en parler ici. S'il te plaît, dis à Muriel que tout va bien. On est juste un petit peu en retard.

Ensuite, j'appuie le doigt sur ma tempe.

— Pense à la répétition d'hier soir. Tu comprends?

Faisant une grimace, Françoise appuie le doigt sur sa propre tempe.

— *Capisce!*

À la suite des derniers préparatifs, de mon va-et-vient de plus en plus rapide, de mes battements de coeur croissants, enfin, dès sept heures vingt, soeur Victoria annonce:

— Bon, ça y est. Moué, m'as sortir, avertir les autres.

En attendant dans le transept de l'église devant l'autel de Saint Joseph, le père Sansouci, Gérard, Simon et moi regardons tous Sylvia Pinard, la fille d'honneur, suivie de Muriel et son frère David—leur père étant décédé depuis longtemps—marchant le long de l'allée principale au son majestueux de mon oncle Jacques jouant de l'orgue.

Lorsque nous commençons à nous approcher pour les rejoindre, le père Sansouci déclare:

— N’oubliez pas ce que je vous ai dit à la répétition hier soir. Si vous ou Muriel avez des doutes, dites « non » puis nous terminerons la cérémonie. Souvenez-vous du fait que ce soit un engagement à vie.

Toujours en marchant lentement, Simon se tourne vers moi. Son sourire, qui semble vouloir supprimer un éclat de rire, me dit qu’il ne peut pas croire ce qu’il vient d’entendre. Au moins maintenant il sait que je ne plaisantais pas auparavant. Quant à moi, je me demande ce que Gérard doit penser après avoir entendu la déclaration du père Sansouci. Je ne me retourne pas pour le regarder, de peur que cela produise entre nous un éclat de rire.

Arrivé face à face avec Muriel, je constate chez elle une grimace d’incertitude. Je la connais assez bien pour deviner qu’il ne s’agit pas de nervosité pré-nuptiale. D’après nos entretiens avec le père Sansouci et de ce qu’elle ait pu apprendre de ma soeur à propos des causes du retard ce soir, je calcule que Muriel s’inquiète plutôt que la solennité de notre cérémonie de mariage soit menacée davantage.

Avec Simon et Sylvia, nous prenons nos places aux prie-Dieu devant le maître-autel, tandis que le père Sansouci et Gérard prennent les leurs derrière l’autel.

Faisant face à nous quatre ainsi qu’à nos familles et amis dans les bancs derrière nous, le père Sansouci commence la prière d’ouverture:

— Au nom du Père—, et du Fils, et du Saint—prit. Am—

Ses paroles syllabiques sont accompagnées d’un bruit de friture et d’un bourdonnement assez fort qui résonnent à travers l’église.

Sans aucun doute, la paroisse Notre-Dame a besoin d’un nouveau microphone d’autel.

Ensuite, apparemment inconscient de la situation, le père Sansouci récite le reste de la prière d'ouverture, sa voix interrompue en compétition avec le craquement du microphone.

Nous quatre, nous nous regardons les uns les autres en voulant dire: *Où va-t-on avec tout cela?*

De l'autel, Gérard me regarde en haussant les épaules. Il se penche vers le microphone et tente de le régler. Ça ne sert à rien. À chaque fois que le père Sansouci parle dedans, on a le même résultat. En fin de compte, Gérard éteint le microphone.

Situés près de l'autel, nous pouvons entendre le père Sansouci, mais il est douteux que sa voix faible se rende jusqu'aux oreilles des gens dans les bancs. Toujours parfaitement ignorant de ce qui se passe autour de lui, il continue à célébrer la messe.

Plus le temps passe, plus je suis tenté de me retourner pour voir si soit soeur Victoria ou le bedeau soit quelque part dans l'église afin que je puisse faire signe à l'un d'eux de nous apporter un nouveau microphone. Mais devant tout le monde, je n'ose pas.

Lorsque Simon et Sylvia font leurs lectures respectives et que Gérard prononce son sermon, au moins ce microphone-là fonctionne bien. *Domage qu'il soit installé à la chaire.*

Immédiatement après le sermon, pendant lequel Gérard établit un lien entre l'amour de Jésus-Christ pour l'humanité et l'amour entre époux et épouse, vient le moment de la cérémonie du mariage elle-même. Puisque Gérard préside et le père Sansouci ne fait qu'observer, tout se déroule bien. Nous prononçons nos vœux, nous échangeons nos alliances, et Gérard termine en nous disant:

— Au cas où vous vous le demandiez, vous pouvez maintenant vous considérer mariés.

Il le dit assez fort afin que toute l'assistance puisse l'entendre.

De fait, tout le monde rit.

Et puis, le père Sansouci reprend la célébration de la messe nuptiale. Il est évident qu'il ne l'a pas fait en français depuis plusieurs décennies, car à tout moment, il perd sa place dans le rituel. Ça n'aide pas non plus qu'à cause de la chaleur et l'humidité écrasantes de juillet, sans climatisation dans cette église ancienne, on ait installé un gros ventilateur oscillant, qui souffle parfois sur les pages du rituel. Il me paraît donc ironique qu'un prêtre expérimenté feuillette rapidement le rituel sans retrouver sa place, tandis que le jeune séminariste lui prête secours avec facilité.

Pendant l'offertoire, un bruit de pas traînants provient de derrière l'église. De nouveau, nous nous regardons tous les quatre avec la même pensée: *mais qu'est-ce que ça pourrait bien être cette fois?* Plus le bruit augmente, plus nous nous apercevons que quelqu'un s'approche du devant de l'église. Ensuite, nous entendons les échos d'un agenouillement tombant brusquement. Après un moment de silence, un son assez fort qui ressemble au plissement de papier couvre la voix douce du père Sansouci. De nouveau, j'ai envie de me retourner pour voir ce qui se passe, mais je résiste. Muriel et moi nous regardons l'un l'autre. Son expression est une réflexion de la mienne, qui dit: *J'ai envie de rire, de pleurer et de hurler tous à la fois. Quoiqu'elle devrait être une occasion solennelle, notre grande journée devient une comédie d'erreurs.*

Pendant la communion, mon oncle Jacques joue l'*Ave Maria* de Franz Schubert. Parce que nous nous marions en français, j'avais demandé à Muriel si mon oncle pouvait



jouer l'*Ave Maria* de Charles Gounod. Cependant, Muriel, qui joue du piano classique, insistait sur la version de Schubert, sa préférée. D'après la façon dont se déroule la soirée, mon oncle aurait pu jouer la *Marche funèbre d'une marionnette* de Gounod—l'indicatif de l'émission de télévision d'Alfred Hitchcock datant des années 1950 et '60—et ça n'aurait pas rendu les affaires pires qu'elles le sont déjà.

Et enfin, c'est terminé.

Par la suite, sur le perron de l'église, les gens nous saluent.

— Pendant queuque temps-là, j'pensais que t'avais eu peur pis que t'avais laissé ma p'tite soeur toute seule à l'autel, me dit Denis, l'autre frère de Muriel.

— Rien qu'à cause que toué, Denis, t'as peur de t'accrocher à quelqu'un, répond Muriel, ça veut pas dire que Paul est comme toué. J'avais aucun doute à propos de lui, pas pour une seule minute.

— Moi, j'ai failli sortir de l'église, dit Marie-Madeleine, l'épouse de Simon. Cette femme qui est entrée dans l'église en plein milieu de la messe est venue s'asseoir à côté de moi, puis elle a commencé à fouiller dans un gros sac à papier qu'elle portait.

Marie-Madeleine met la main sur son ventre enflé.

— Elle sentait l'urine et ça me rendait malade. Quelqu'un m'a dit que c'est une rongeuse de balustrade qui va à tous les offices religieux.

— C'était un vrai cirque avec le prêtre qui jouait le rôle de Monsieur Loyal, dit ma tante Marion.

— Fais attention, ma tante, je lui réponds tout bas, parce que le voilà.

Gérard est avec lui.

— Voici un cadeau de noces pour vous, le père Sansouci nous dit à Muriel et moi. C'est mon nouveau recueil de poésies, intitulé *Bon voyage*. C'est un titre qui vous va bien puisque vous êtes sur le point de partir en voyage de noces.

Il me passe son volume ainsi qu'une enveloppe.

— Et puis, ça c'est votre certificat de mariage. Je l'ai fait signer par votre ami ici, monsieur Therrien, à titre d'officiant, mais c'est moi qui ai signé vos deux noms et ceux de vos témoins. Pourquoi vous obliger de revenir à la sacristie pour un petit détail?

Bouleversé, je fourre l'enveloppe entre les pages du livre.

— Euh ... merci mon père, je lui dis en lui serrant la main.

Muriel a le souffle coupé par ce que nous venons d'entendre. Le père Sansouci aussitôt parti, elle se tourne vers Gérard.

— I' a signé nos noms, tous les quatre. Penses-tu que c'est légal? On est mariés ou non?

Avec un sourire sarcastique, Gérard hausse les épaules.

— J'peux pas parler pour l'État du New-Hampshire, mais dans les circonstances, j'pense que le bon Dieu prendra ça en considération.

— Pour le père Sansouci, j'ajoute, c'est peut-être sa manière de rendre une annulation plus facile à obtenir. Mais si on peut survivre à tout ce qui vient de nous arriver ce soir à cause de lui, notre mariage pourra endurer n'importe quoi.

— Ainsi soit-il, dit Gérard.

Tout à coup, mes parents et la mère de Muriel s'approchent de nous et nous embrassent.

— Votre prêtre-là, dit mon père, c'est tout un *show* qu'i' nous a fait.

Je l'avoue, mon père n'a jamais été reconnu pour son tact.

— T'es pas drôle, Lucien, ma mère lui dit. C'est quand j'y pense ....

— Ouais, dit ma belle-mère, j'aimerais 'i tordre le cou avec son col romain.

Je me tourne vers ma mère.

— Et puis, Maman, te rappelles-tu ce que tu me disais à toutes les fois que les choses allaient pas à mon goût? Tu disais « laisse faire » parce que j'm'en souviendrais plus le jour de mon mariage. Là, qu'est-ce que t'as à dire?

Ma mère reste muette.

— Laisse faire, dit ma belle-mère, tu t'en rappelleras plus le jour de tes funérailles.

# Résonance

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Volume 2

Article 4

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2020

## French School

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### Recommended Citation

Gargiulo, Charles A. (2020) "French School," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 4.

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## French School (from *Farewell, Little Canada: A Memoir*)

By Charles Gargiulo

### One

Monday morning finally arrived, my first day in my new school. My mom and I had moved to Little Canada in Lowell where she had relatives after my dad just left one day. We couldn't stay in our old house in the town next door. We found a tenement apartment that Mom could afford, and she found the school that she thought would be a good one for me. I had been at a Catholic school in our old town.

I got up and put on the required blue dress shirt and a tie, said goodbye to Mom when Dicky came by, and then walked with him down Austin Street and took a right on Moody Street, past Aiken Street to the school—St. Joseph Elementary School—a four-story brick building with a really big metal fire escape that practically covered the entire front of the building. There was a tiny area behind a short, four-foot-high iron picket fence where kids gathered until the bell rang. This crowded area was where we would get sent out to play during recess. It was like the worst playground area ever. You were jammed in between the iron picket fence, the school building, and the convent, which was a three-story house where all the nuns who taught in the school lived. On top of that, the ground we played on was paved with tar. You could hardly move because it was so small and jammed with kids. If you tried running and tripped over someone, you'd scrape your skin and ruin your clothes skidding on the tar. Or gouge an eye out if you landed head first on the spear-shaped ends of the iron picket fence.

I hung out with Dicky until the bell rang and the nuns came out and called our names to assign us to our classes. Dicky and I ended up in different classes because he had stayed back one year and was still only in the sixth grade while I was assigned to the seventh grade.

Dicky was a nice kid, but I always felt bad for him because he had bad eyes and wore glasses. He was short and skinny, an easy target for bullies in the neighborhood. A week before school started, he was beaten so badly that he landed in St. Joseph's Hospital, which was on the edge of Little Canada. He still had stitches for the cuts and the kind of black-and-blues that turn pale green and brown when they fade. Any punk would have to come through me now to get to him. Dicky would give me or you the shirt off his back and give torn-up bread to the local pigeons and sparrows who were hungry.

My class was on the top floor in the front overlooking Moody Street. The nun leading my class up to the room had this weird little wooden thing that she'd use to make a click-click sound and it meant we were supposed to follow her, or shut up, or sit down, or stand up and all kinds of things.

Apparently, if a nun could communicate without talking, it made them more holy or something. I found it annoying and stupid and could feel my temper rising.

The nuns wore long grey outfits that covered their heads with some white cardboard thing underneath the hood. A big metal crucifix necklace hung down their chests. And then to my shock, they talked to us in French. How the heck was I supposed to understand what they were saying? My mom spoke French, in fact almost all the grown-ups in Little Canada spoke French. Most of them would keep going back and forth between English and French when they spoke, but all of us kids spoke English. All the other kids knew French because they grew up around it, but I never learned French because my father was Italian. Mom and Dad spoke English to understand each other. So, since I spent my entire life living with them until he split, I never learned French.

The classes themselves were taught in English, but in between classes we were supposed to talk in French with the nuns. Kind of hard to do when you don't understand the language. But that wasn't the main issue with me, since most of the talking in French amounted to saying stuff like "*Oui, ma Mère,*" "*Non, ma Mère,*" "*Merci, ma Mère,*" or "*S'il vous plait, ma Mère.*" It was the principle of it that made me mad. Why did I have to speak French if my father was Italian?

## Two

I also didn't want to call them my "mother" in French, English, or any other language. The only other nuns I knew before I went to St. Joseph's, we used to call Sister. That was fine, but as you might have figured out by now, I was a little touchy about people dumping on my mom. And now they wanted me to call somebody else my mother? What made these nuns so special that they got promoted from being a Sister to a Mother? I was already scared to death of losing my mom, so I wasn't exactly too keen about calling somebody else my mother.

Mom had red hair, and reminded some people of the actress Ann Sheridan, which was weird because she made me think of the kind of character that a movie rough guy like Humphrey Bogart would call "a tough broad with a heart of gold." She was funny. I loved it when neighbors visited and joked around. When she started, she couldn't stop laughing, long and hard until tears came. Nobody I knew laughed like that, almost as if she was afraid that if she stopped laughing the feeling might not come back.

Once again, I found myself in a situation where I knew it was only a matter of time before something bad caught up to me. We had two different nuns teaching my seventh-grade class. One was very nice, the other one mean and nasty. Standing next to each other, the two nuns looked like

female versions of Laurel and Hardy, except the nice one was tall and heavy and the mean one was short and skinny. Fortunately, the nice nun was my home-room teacher. She had the coolest name, Noëlle Chabanel. Not only did it flow off your tongue and feel good saying it, *Noël* means Christmas in French. All the kids used to call her Mother Christmas. That's funny because she sort of looked like a very young female Santa Claus with rosy cheeks and a pleasingly plump face with sparkly eyes behind wire-rim glasses.

The mean and nasty nun with a wrinkly face never smiled. She could have been a female Moe from the Three Stooges in wire-rims. Her name was Rose, but the kids already called her Mean Mother, and just my luck, it was Mean Mother who caught up to me with a French question between class. I told her I didn't understand her question because I didn't speak French. She got all red in the face and practically spit out that I had to speak French and better learn it fast and, in the meantime, I was to address her as *ma Mère* and use words that I know in French like *Oui* and *Merci*. I said I wouldn't call her *ma Mère* or speak to her in French because I was Italian.

Then it was off to the Principal's office, even though the Principal was technically supposed to be called MOTHER Superior. And of course, just to add to my problems, I refused to call her that and I just called her the Principal. When I got to the office, Mean Mother got all bent out of shape and told the Principal what a trouble-maker I was and how disrespectful I was being. The Principal tried to give me the stare down and asked me if I wanted to be expelled. I tried explaining my position, but she wasn't having any of it. She said the school had rules and if I didn't like them, I could go to the public school.

I told her I didn't care and that I was only going here because that's where my mom sent me. Then she said if that was going to be my attitude then I was suspended, and I would be expelled unless my mother came to meet with her. It felt like she threatened to put a dagger through my heart, but then she gave me one more chance to avoid being suspended and letting my mother know. She asked if I would stop this nonsense and attempt to speak French when speaking to nuns between classes and address each one as *ma Mère*. I said no, because I didn't speak French, and I already had a mother.

### **Three**

It was horrible. I couldn't understand what the heck was wrong with me. I knew I was being really stupid and childish over something not worth fighting about, and yet something inside me felt like it was breaking and the more they pushed and threatened me the more it felt like that something was going to break completely. I was also so angry I thought my head was going to explode. Couldn't they

see how miserable I was? Didn't they care? Couldn't they just back off a little bit and give me a chance to deal with this?

No, of course not. And now they were going to drag my mom into it. I was sent back to my class for the rest of the day and I was given a letter to bring to my mom, saying that I would be suspended unless she showed up with me to address this issue with the "Mother" Superior. Fortunately, my last few classes of the day were with Noëlle Chabanel. I don't think I heard a thing the rest of the day as I just daydreamed about how miserable it was going to be when I got home and told Mom. When the final bell rang, Noëlle asked me if I could stay after class to speak with her.

Even though she's a really nice person, I was expecting her to do her teacher job and give me a lecture about how dumb I was being and to explain to me about how serious a situation I've put myself in if I didn't wise up. But instead she said it hurt her to see how much pain I was in and she knew I was just being loyal to my dad. She said he would be very happy to see how much I loved him, and that was a good thing, and she wished that I wasn't caught up in such a tough position.

Talk about being taken by surprise. Here I was getting ready to be stubborn and defiant, and she sucker punches me with being kind and understanding. I actually had to turn my head to the side for a second so she wouldn't see my eyes starting to get wet. Sneaking in a quick dab to dry my eyes, I got myself under control and before I got a chance to say something she gently asked, "What do you think we can do about it?"

This time I'm sure she saw that my eyes got a little wet as I said in a really pathetic voice, "I don't know . . . I don't want to hurt my Mom but . . . know it's stupid but...I can't help it! I just can't help it! Why does this have to be such a big deal? It's not like I killed somebody. I'm not speaking French, and I'm not going to let her make me!"

I didn't mean to yell and get so emotional because she was only trying to help me, but like I told you it felt like something was broken inside of me and I didn't know how to fix it. Then to my shocked surprise, I noticed that Noëlle's eyes were watering up. I said I was so sorry, and I felt bad because I knew she was trying to be helpful. Then I asked her, "Is it the same for nuns as it is for priests, you know like if I wanted to talk with you that you would have to keep it a secret?" She said that if I wanted to tell her something in private that she would never tell anyone.

Then I told her about my dad. I told her how much I missed him and all the reasons why I did and how sad I felt that I would probably never see him again. It was kind of nice to be able to talk out loud about him and tell somebody how great a guy he was and all the cool memories I had about our time together. I must have gone on forever. When I finished, Noëlle said, "Wow, your dad sounds



like a wonderful man. No wonder you miss him so much. I know you are afraid that you'll never see him again, but given how strong a relationship the two of you had, I'm sure he misses you very much and as soon as he figures out whatever it is he's dealing with, he'll be back into your life."

I know she meant well, but as soon as she said that it was like a dark cloud came over me and I angrily yelled out, "No, he won't! He'll never come back! Because it's my fault that he left. He left because I was bad to him. I don't blame him for leaving because it was my fault that he did. Just like I'm being bad now and it's going to be my fault that my Mother will be taken away from me. See, look at me, if I don't speak French, or call every stupid nun my Mother, I'm going to be expelled from school. And when they expel me, it'll destroy my Mom and she'll get blamed by the Welfare guy for being a bad mother because I'm such a bad kid and they will take me away and put me in an orphanage. But even knowing that, I'm so bad and selfish I still won't speak French. I'm no good, that's why my Dad left and it's why I'm going to lose my Mom!"

The last thing I remember before I got up and ran out of the classroom and out of the school building was Noëlle's eyes getting really big and her mouth opening like she was trying to say something. The next hour or so was just a blur, and I don't remember what I did. I think I just walked around in a daze, totally lost and feeling completely hopeless. And I still had a letter to deliver to my Mom.

#### **Four**

Since it was Friday, I decided to give myself a day to collect myself before I told Mom. I holed up in my room pretending I was doing homework and mostly just read and listened to the radio until my mom went to work. Mostly, I just laid on my bed and thought about my dad.

When I got up Saturday morning, I still couldn't get up the courage to give Mom the letter I got from school and the bad news that came with it. I started doing a bunch of push-ups and sit-ups and delivered deadly palm strikes over and over again to the cardboard face hanging from a thread. Then Dicky knocked on my door and I invited him in to hang out in my room. He asked where I was after school, and I told him to keep his voice down so my mother wouldn't hear us. I told him what happened. Not the stuff about my dad, just that I was in trouble because I didn't want to speak French, they were going to expel me, and I didn't know what to do. I could tell he was confused and thought I was nuts, but he was cool about it and acted like what I was doing was totally reasonable and I was being screwed royally. I told him Mother Christmas had said to me that the only thing she couldn't keep a secret would be if I was going to hurt myself or somebody else.

## Five

We hung around for a couple of hours listening to all of my records and talking about stuff until he had to leave because he had to do something with his father. I made the rounds, going over to see Raymond next door for a while, then dropping in to see Diane downstairs. We played some kid games with her creepy sons and then went over to visit my Aunt Rose. My Uncle Clarence and Daisy were out doing errands, so I caught up on things with Aunt Rose. Of course, she wanted to know how I liked my new school. I figured that was coming, so I started off by telling her how much I liked Noëlle Chabanel. Then I slowly came around to the fix I was in.

I guess I mean that I told her half of the fix I was in. I told her that I was being threatened with expulsion because I refused to call the nuns, “Mother.” I couldn’t tell her the French part because it was bad enough I was going to hurt my Mom’s feelings with that, but since I was a little boy my Aunt Rose used to pat me on the head and ask me if I was her “*petit bon garçon*,” and I would always answer, “*Oui, ma tante Rose*.” How the heck was I supposed to tell her that I refused to speak French because I was Italian?

Like Dicky, she looked confused about why I would be willing to be thrown out of school for such a stupid thing. Still, she could tell I was really messed up, and instead of saying something like “What the hell is wrong with you?” she talked to me like we had a very serious problem to solve.

Then good ol’ Aunt Rose came up with the perfect answer. She said something like, “I don’t blame you for feeling the way you do. It would be very wrong if somebody tried to make you call them your mom. But I don’t think that’s what they’re doing here. Think of it like this. When you talk to a priest, you don’t have a problem calling him Father, but if he wanted you to call him your dad that would be wrong and you wouldn’t do it. Try and think of the nuns in the same way. Calling them Mother would be just like calling a Priest, Father. It’s just a title. You are not calling them your mom. So, it’s okay.”

Amazing, she solved my problem. Almost. Because then she patted my head and asked me if I was still her “*petit bon garçon*,” and I said “*Oui, ma tante Rose*” and felt my heart sink knowing that the “Mother” Superior was still going to throw me out because I’m Italian. So, I hung out and watched the TV while she said a couple of hundred rosaries until Uncle Clarence and their collie Daisy got back. Uncle Clarence was all happy and bubbly and told us about all these wonderful people he met and amazing things he saw when he was out and Daisy respectfully went over to say hello to Aunt Rose by sidling up to her gently, knowing she was frail, and when Aunt Rose was done patting her, she bounded over to me, acting like greeting me made her the happiest dog in the whole world.

I hung around that afternoon while Aunt Rose made her famous tomato soup that had all different kinds of noodles in it. Some French people call this “*soupe rouge*.” I don’t know what she did to it, but it never tasted like anybody else’s tomato-flavored soup. I loved it and that’s saying something because I’ve always been a very fussy eater. We ate it with a fresh loaf of French bread that Uncle Clarence brought home from his errands. After finishing it up with “Pinwheels,” my Aunt Rose’s favorite cookies made up of marshmallow and cake and completely covered with chocolate, I said bye and headed home to tell Mom the bad news.

## Six

It was one of the hardest things I ever had to do. I tried my best to cushion the blow by easing my way into it with “Isn’t it nice out?” and “How are things going on your new job?” and “I visited Aunt Rose today and she made her famous soup” and everything I could do to avoid the subject. Then I noticed that she started to make that “Wait a minute, what’s going on here” suspicious look, so I quickly shifted to, “Oh, by the way, I forget I was supposed to give you this from school” and handed her the letter. She looked at it and I could see her face literally go through a slow-motion change from curious to confused to What?, to WHAT THE HELL! Then she blurted out, “What is this? I don’t get it? They say you can’t go back to school unless I come in to meet with the Mother Superior. What did you do?”

I’m sure you can imagine that it didn’t make any more sense to her or make her feel any better when I explained to her why I was being threatened with expulsion. I could tell she couldn’t settle on an emotion as she went from anger, to sadness, to fear and then settled on calm and reasonable, talking slowly to me like maybe I had brain damage.

On Monday morning it was off to school with my mother. We had to show up an hour before school started. When we arrived at the Principal’s office, I was surprised to see Noëlle Chabanel sitting in on the meeting. Unfortunately, Mean Mother was there too. I could tell Mom was nervous. “Mother” Superior started the meeting and she was cold as ice. She told Mom about the not-speaking-French thing and the not-calling-them-Mother thing and about how I was told that I would have to conform to those rules if I wanted to be a student at this school, and that I still had refused.

Then she turned to me and asked me if I was now willing to follow the rules. I said I would be willing to address them all as Mother. She smiled and my Mother looked relieved and then “Mother” Superior said, “And you’ll address your teachers in French in between classes?”

I didn't say anything. Her smile faded and my Mom got tense and said, "C'mon Charlie, tell her you'll be willing to speak French." I still said nothing.

"Mother" Superior said, "Well, what is it, are you going to follow the rules?"

I said, "I told you I would call you guys Mother." Noëlle Chabanel then interjected and said, "That's really good," but then "Mother" Superior cut her off and said, "And what about the French part?" I said nothing.

"Mother" Superior said, "Okay, but you do understand that he will have to comply with the rules of the school. Since you are on welfare, you know we are allowing him to be enrolled here even though you can't pay full tuition. I hope you can make him understand the opportunity he has here." God, I wanted to kill her. The nerve to talk to Mom like that. I didn't know what to do, but I was NEVER going to speak French to them.

I was allowed to go to my class, and when I said goodbye to Mom she had the saddest look on her face. I hated myself. And I hated Mean Mother and "Mother" Superior. Fortunately, Noëlle Chabanel put her hand on my shoulder and said, "Okay, young man, please come with me now because it's almost time for our class to start." I really did like Noëlle an awful lot though.

The school day seemed like it took forever, and my mind wandered all day dreading what was going to happen when I got home. At the last bell, when I got up to leave Noëlle came up to me and said, "Just make sure you come back tomorrow. I want to see you at school tomorrow."

I said, "Why? I'm just going to be kicked out because I'm not going to speak French. I told you why. I'm sorry, but I can't do it."

She said, "No matter what, please just show up to school tomorrow."

When I got home, I could tell my Mom had been crying because her eyes were bloodshot. She hugged me and said she couldn't understand why I was doing this. She said she got me enrolled at St. Joseph after talking with the pastor at St. Jean-Baptiste (St. Jean the Baptist to me) to get him to waive my tuition expenses and now I was going to throw it away over something so silly. She said my behavior was scaring her.

I said I was sorry and didn't know what was wrong with me. I would address the nuns as Mother, but I wasn't going to speak French. She then asked if it was because I really wanted to go to the public school instead. I said no, it had nothing to do with that, I was fine with going to St. Joseph if they would drop that stupid rule. She said if I wasn't going to speak French, then there was nothing she could do to stop them from dropping me and that we would have to go enroll with the Lowell Public schools. I told her I was supposed to go to St. Joseph tomorrow because Noëlle asked me to come.

I went to school the next day, and Noëlle was happy to see me. Following her class on writing and reading, I had to go to Mean Mother's class for algebra. I saw Mean Mother outside the classroom door, and she asked me if I was coming to her class. I said, "Yes, Mother Rose." When I got to my seat, all of a sudden it hit me. She asked me in English, and I replied to her in English, and she didn't do anything. And from that point on, I just kept coming to school and I never spoke French, and nothing happened to me. I don't know why, but I'm sure Mother Christmas played some role in creating a miracle for me and my mom.

2020

## Sister George and What's in a Name

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### Recommended Citation

Hebert, Ernest (2020) "Sister George and What's in a Name," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/5>

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## Sister George and What's in a Name

By Ernest Hebert

I don't remember the year, but let's say it's 1987 when my brother Tony at age 44 and I at age 46 are headed for St. Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire, to visit our aunt, Sister George. She's come down from Canada on some kind of Catholic Church business, and my mother, who has been in touch with her older sibling by telephone, says that Sister George is eager to see us.

She's a bit of a stranger to us. We haven't seen her in decades and even when we were kids living in our parents' house on 19 Oak Street in Keene, New Hampshire, we saw her only on occasion in the brief time she was stationed at a parish relatively nearby in Nashua. What I remember most clearly about her is that she's tiny, even tinier than our mother. I also remember a cheerful smile, a shy demeanor, and that we never had a real conversation with her because we spoke different languages.

Tony and I meet Sister George at St. A's in a room that looks like a chapel retrofitted into a space that my parents would refer to as a parlor. In a time when some nuns, including my cousin Anne, a Sister of Mercy with a Ph.D. in education, are wearing civvies, Sister George is still in her full regalia black habit, gold cross hanging from a pendant around her neck.

As we enter, she looks very nervous but full of anticipation for our meeting. Her right hand holds the crucifix that falls from the pendant to the middle of her chest. Such a tiny lady with such an exquisite face full of mirth. We hug her with care. She's so delicately constructed that I'm afraid I'll crush her. After our hellos and her *bonjour* we step back and there's an awkward moment.

Finally, Sister George speaks her first words in English, a bit of slang she must have picked up during her visit at St. A's and that she planned to show off at just the right moment. With a sweeping gesture of a hand toward the chairs, she says, "Park your ass."

Our meeting with Sister George was brief. Nothing changed. We could not connect with her in our language, and she could not connect to us in hers.

A few years after my brother Tony and I visited her, Sister George retired to the Motherhouse in Quebec. My mother didn't think she was getting good health care, so she worked the phones trying to help her sister. It wasn't until after Sister George had died that my mother learned that the funeral mass had already been carried out and the body buried. Where is her grave? Somewhere in Canada. I don't know the exact location.

Now in 2019 my aunt's order, The Sisters of Joan of Arc, has faded into obscurity. Here's a direct quote I picked up, dated August 2017, from Catholic Answers Forum: "The Sisters of St. Joan of Arc, who are based in Quebec, closed all of their convents due to age, and have just one [convent] in Canada. Their charisma was to minister in rectories. Their motherhouse was sold to a developer who turned the building into condos."

I had never heard that word "charisma" used in that context before, so I looked it up. Secondary meaning: "a divinely conferred power or talent."

What of that phrase "minister to rectories?" What does that mean? It means they were cooks and maids at the residences of priests. I've heard people refer to such work as "demeaning," but in my family's ethic, which I have adopted, there was no such a thing as demeaning work. There was only work and the pride you took in doing it as well as you could, or the shame you felt if you slacked off. The idea of work as a charisma--"a divinely conferred power or talent"--is probably the single most important concept I learned growing up Catholic. It brought me through a number of jobs, from age sixteen to age 31 when I landed my first middle-class position: sports reporter for *The Keene Sentinel* newspaper. Before that I worked as a store clerk, telephone equipment installer, janitor, gas pumper, enlisted man in Uncle Sam's army, mill worker, hospital laundry man, landscape laborer, and my favorite charisma, taxi driver.

My mother died in 1994 at the age of 85. I was surprised when I came across her death certificate. I'd always known my mother as Jeannette Vaccarest Hebert. The death certificate listed her first name as E-l-o-d-i-e. I pronounce that name the way it's spelled in English, Elodee. Maybe there's another way



to say it. How did my mother say it? I don't know, because I never heard her voice the name.

I learned another of my mother's secrets when she was in old age. She often talked about her childhood where she cared for her father who was disabled by a stroke. It was among her duties to eat meals with him. Because of brain damage, he would eat from her plate, and she would eat from his. She recalled that one day she and her friends found him sitting on the ground several blocks from their tenement house in Manchester. They took him home in a child's little red wagons. My grandmother supported the family working in a shoe shop.

In her teen years my mother liked acting in plays, and she talked about attending nursing school at Notre Dame Hospital in Manchester at age 23. One day the math came alive in my mind, and I said, "You never talk about the five years between high school graduation and nursing school. What were you doing during those years?"

She shrugged and said, "I was in the convent."

She belonged to the same order as St. George, The Sisters of Joan of Arc. She couldn't bring herself to take those final vows in her sixth year, not because of a crisis of faith--she remained a devout Catholic all her life--but because she wanted a family.

When she married my dad, Elphege Hebert, she was 31. He was 28. They were both virgins. They met at an estate in Dublin, New Hampshire, owned by a branch of the famous Cabot clan. My mother was what we call today a nanny for the Cabot children. I don't think she would have liked that word "nanny." She was proud to be a Registered Nurse.

My dad was born in Keene on Wood Street. Nearby are Wagner Street, Cobb Street, Speaker Street, and Hooper Street. There are no Ruth and Gehrig Streets. Keene was never a New York Yankees town, but it was a Yankee town. We French, Irish, Italian, Polish, German, and Lithuanian Catholics were outnumbered by the Protestants. Keene might be a Yankee town of English speakers, but in the Hebert household of my parents' on both sides, French was the favored language. As far as I know my father was never touchy about his unusual name, Elphege. In his world it was as ordinary as Tom, Dick, and Harry.

The Hebert name in my genealogy goes all over the place,

because my dad's mother was also a Hebert. My father had fond memories of his maternal grandfather, Alcide Hebert, who was a carpenter and landlord for a couple of properties in Keene, though he was born in Canada. My father's mother, whose name I cannot tell you, died giving birth to my Aunt Theresa when my dad was thirteen. My grandfather, Arthur Hebert, remarried a Yankee woman, which was how she was referred to in the family--a Yankee woman--and of course she didn't speak French, so the language in the household transitioned to English.

My mother was raised on the West Side in Manchester where you could live a lifetime and never have to speak English. When my parents started dating they found two things in common. Neither was a drinker, and they both grew up as Franco-Americans. My mother retaught my father the French that he had lost when his mother died and his father remarried. French became the language of my parents' romance, so that was the language that was spoken in the home when their first child was born, me.

When I started Kindergarten in Keene at age 5 I spoke fluent French and only a few words of English. I don't remember this, but my parents told me that my experience with language in Kindergarten--where I was the only French speaker--was so bad that they decided to speak only English in my presence. The result: I never again spoke French. In fact by the time I started first grade a year later at St. Joseph's Elementary School, I had, through some mental alchemy that to this day I do not understand, killed almost everything I knew of the French language. Even when I studied it in high school and later in college, I just could not learn it. All I remember today is common expletives, intensifiers, soft-swears--I dunno what to call these expressions. I have no idea how to spell the words, so I write them in this essay in phonetic English: Ih moh ta dzee, la tete de pyuhsh, la clot de shee-yeh. And I can count to twelve ... that's it--that's all that remains of the language of my early childhood.

I know that some people grow up nimble with multiple languages, but I ain't one of them. I had enough problems as a kid figuring out one language that even today at times boggles my mind. And yet that experience of dumping a language and replacing it with another seems to have helped make a writer out of me. For one thing I was never able to pull out of my head clichéd usage in English--I had to invent my own phrases. Also, early on I paid attention to the way people spoke. I went out of my way to avoid talking like my relatives who spoke English with

a French-Canadian accent. I didn't want to talk with a Yankee accent either, or an Irish brogue, or any kind of accent. I wanted to talk like John Cameron Swayze. You have to be of an age to recognize that name. He read the news on the Camel News Caravan, sponsored by Camel Cigarettes. "I'd walk a mile for a camel." And, in case you didn't know, "More doctors smoke Camels than any other cigarette."

In school I was an average student with little interest in subjects taught by the Sisters of Mercy at St. Joe's--especially religion, which from the very beginning of the Baltimore Catechism--who made us, God made us, why did God make us, to know him, to love him, to serve him in this world, and to be with him in the next--all struck me as guess work and boring boring boring. Who in his right mind would want to spend all eternity in adoration of a supreme being, and why would this supreme being want my company? I had these questions as a kid, and they still nettle me.

Nor did the reading assignments thrill me. Is there any literature more dreary and stylistically listless than the activities of Dick and Jane in the lower grades? And why would any seventh grader thrill to read *The Courtship of Miles Standish* and other texts written in 19th century verse forms? I didn't discover my passion for reading in school, but on my own at the Keene Public Library, beginning with *The Swiss Family Robinson*. However, there was one area of study at St. Joseph Elementary School that lit me up, English grammar, in particular diagramming sentences. In fact grammar was the only topic in school that I was ever good at and that I made a point to learn. I didn't know it at the time, but I was teaching myself the fundamentals that every skilled writer has to know. When I started writing at age twenty-three as a freshman in college, I went from being a non-writer to a passably good writer very quickly (I published the second short story I ever wrote in a national magazine), because (I think) I had already internalized the geometry of the English language. Thank you, Sisters of Mercy.

My brother Tony's name is actually Omer, O-m-e-r, and T-on-y is short for his middle name, Antoine. He's always hated the name Omer. And he was not so crazy about Antoine. Unless you wanted an argument you called him Tony or Anthony, who was my mother's favorite saint.

We had a little shrine in the kitchen of our house on 19 Oak Street in Keene that had its origin as a cuckoo clock. The

cuckoo guts had been removed so that the face was open. Sometimes I wish somebody would remove the cuckoo parts of me. Then again maybe without the cuckoo there would be no me. Maybe cuckoo is as close a gift from the divine that I'll ever possess. Inside my mother's emptied cuckoo clock was a plaster cast of St. Anthony, the patron saint of lost objects. My mother admitted she had lost something of great value and prayed to St. Anthony for its return, but she wouldn't say what it was. And I never pushed her on it. In our family there were more topics you didn't talk about than ones you did. The idea was to keep the peace. It worked. I've never had a falling out with any family member.

For example, I never told my devout mother that even as a child I never had faith in the Catholic God, nor in any God. Let me make a distinction here. I am not an atheist--I'm not smart enough to be an atheist. Maybe there is a God. All I know for sure is that even if he exists I don't have faith in him. My feeling is that if there's a God he's a don't-give-shit-about-people God. Maybe religious faith comes from a gene; some people have it and some people don't. I don't have it.

In the months before she died my mom was bed-ridden in a nursing home with compression fractures in her spine from osteoporosis and untreatable and painful rheumatoid arthritis, which is one reason that I suspect that if there's a God, he's a don't-give-shit-about-people God. My mother's mind remained nimble to the end, but not her body. When she was 82, her body already starting to fail her, she read Robert Perreault's novel *L'Héritage*. She was so moved by that book, written in French by a Manchester, NH, guy, that she translated it into English, in longhand, for her grandchildren. She wrote two drafts, one literal and another in vernacular English to capture the spirit of the French. Quite a feat for any translator, let alone one with no training.

I was very close to my mother; in some ways I was a momma's boy. I often went to her when I needed advice. The best thing she did for me was accept my future wife Medora Lavoie; she embraced her like the daughter she never had. Medora grew up in Dover, New Hampshire, as a Lavoie or is it Lav-wah--I've heard the name spoken both ways. I speak it both ways myself, and so does Medora. Depends on the occasion. The mood. The company.

I was the executor of my mother's will and in the days after her death I handled everything with great competence. I never broke down. Almost a year later somebody sent me a review

of one of my books. The reviewer, Jack Barnes, a Maine writer, happened to mention that Franco-American boys were often close to their mothers. When I read those words I broke down and wept. Took me a year to recognize my own grief.

I've been a professional writer for most of my adult life, as a newspaper journalist, novelist, and teacher of creative writing but the single piece of writing that means the most to me is a poem. I would like to read it to you. It's called:

My Mother's Donuts

On your deathbed  
you told me the stems  
of the flowers I picked for you  
when I was a boy  
were too short to put in a vase.  
I didn't have the heart  
to tell you, you said.  
I remembered the smell of the sun  
on my clothes that you hung  
on the line on a hot summer day.  
And in the winter the smell of the air  
from the clothes  
steaming off the radiators.  
You remembered how happy you were  
with a new electric dryer.  
I remembered you made donuts, I said,  
the aroma, the heavenly taste  
when the donut  
is still hot from the boiling oil.  
By the time they cooled  
the taste was ordinary.  
In those days people didn't tie  
their dogs, you said.  
Oh, yeah, I remember now,  
They came from miles around  
drawn by the smell of your donuts.  
You always made the mistake  
of throwing them the holes.  
I couldn't help myself.  
I laughed--you were too weak to laugh.  
And in the spring  
when dad burned the dead grasses,  
do you remember that smell?  
And the color of the new grass  
growing through the black burn scar

after the rain, the brightest green  
of the new season?  
There's no waiting for an answer;  
you've shut your eyes.  
I go back in time,  
see myself picking flowers,  
a boy's pure love for his mother,  
so brief.

Tony and I are both named after priests. I'm named after my mother's older brother by fourteen years and the leader of our family, the Right Reverend Joseph Ernest Vaccarest. Everybody referred to Father Vaccarest as Father Vac, even after he was promoted to monsignor. His lifetime ambition was to become the first bishop of French-Canadian ancestry in the Diocese of Manchester.

Father Vac, who by the way as a young priest likely married Grace Metalious's parents in Manchester, was deeply involved in a power struggle between the Irish Catholic and French Catholic Church hierarchies in New Hampshire. The subject matter of their disagreements was the curriculum in Catholic schools.

I'd like to digress for a moment: interesting, isn't it, the identity-language people used in those days and those of us in my generation still. You had people calling themselves French who had never been to France, and you had people calling themselves Irish who had never been to Ireland. Ditto Poland, Italy, and so forth.

The Irish had a strategy for assimilation: deal with the Yankee bosses in their own Americanized English language while at the same time cherishing, sometimes inflating, and always flaunting their Irish culture. In the dispute among New Hampshire Catholics over schools the Irish position came down to English-only taught in Catholic Schools, like the school I went to. Among the French clergy and intellectuals the French language all by itself was the culture. So the Franco priests wanted Catholic schools to teach French as well as English and to preach in French from the pulpit.

According to my mother, Father Vac favored a middle course between the two sides, though just what that course was never explained to me when I was a child. Or maybe I just forgot or

wasn't paying attention. I do remember that Father Vac's motto was: you can't live one foot in Canada and one foot in the U.S. But he contradicted himself when he said over and over again that French was his favored language. Anyway the issue became irrelevant when Father Vac died suddenly of a heart attack at age 61 in January of 1956. I was fourteen when Father Vac was found by a housekeeper nun of the order of St. Joan of Arc keeled over at his kneeler in his bedroom. Father Vac was my first mentor, and also served as as my father figure when my dad was in the Navy during World War II. Father Vac's death was the single most traumatic event of my teen years.

Father Vac wasn't like any priest I know of today. He never talked to me as if I were a child. He was the only adult who actually conversed with me. He was a hunter and fisherman with a huge gun collection. Tony and I used to play with his guns in the basement of the rectory at St. Edmund's parish in the Pinardville village of Manchester. He hid the ammo. Father Vac taught me the rudiments of boxing and, more important, infused me with a combative attitude that served me well growing up on the East side in Keene.

Father Vac's given name was Joseph Ernest Vaccarest. My given name is Joseph Ernest Vaccarest Hebert, a fact I never knew until I happened to stumble across my birth certificate when I was in my twenties. I asked my mother, "Where did that 'Joseph' come from?" She told me that in her family the first-born son was always named Joseph, but he would be given another name to go by in public to prevent a confusion of too many Joes. Later I learned that the tradition in Canada was that all the sons were named Joseph and the daughters were named Marie. Maybe so but in my family I'm the only Joseph among three sons.

I find the idea of naming your alpha males after St. Joseph, Jesus' earthly father kind of funny. Here's a guy way down on the priority list of the Church and also, apparently, of the one true God: a beta male, a caregiver, a caretaker, a good provider, a perfect model of a working man in the Yankee mills who never complained, but also never got to have his say, and, from the accounts I learned growing up, never had sex with his blessed virgin wife.

As for my last name, I grew up a Hee-bert. Medora and I have spent the last six winters in New Orleans, where we're Ay-bares. I'm proud to have the Ay-bare name. I mentioned at the beginning of this essay that 1967 was a fateful year for me. It was

fateful because 1967 was the first time I experienced pride in my name when lived in New Orleans for seven months working the 11 pm to 7 am shift as an attendant at DePaul Psychiatric Hospital in New Orleans. I was hired in part because Beth Greene, the head nurse, liked my name. I heard the phrase more than once, "Ay-bare, that's a fine South Louisiana name." Nobody in my part of New Hampshire said "Hebert, that's a fine New England name."

Couple years ago a good friend gave me a tee-shirt celebrating a river with my name in Nova Scotia in the Grand Pre region where my people come from and where the river's name today is pronounced Heh-bert, the River Heh-bert. On my grounds, the Monadnock Region of New Hampshire, I'm a Hee-bit, as in "Ehnie Hee-bit, he's a writah." I've been a Hee-bert or a Hee-bit far too long in Yankee land to make changes. It's kinda sweet though to hear the name spoken the way it feels right, even if I have to travel 2,000 thousand miles to New Orleans. Let me add that my youngest daughter, who grew up in New Hampshire as Nikki Hebert, now resides in Brooklyn, New York, where she's known as Nicole Ay-bear.

I would like to hear your thoughts and stories on the subject of the pronunciation of your names.

My brother Tony, the second born in our household of three boys, was named Omer after a legendary priest on my father's side of the family. But he was long dead when my brother was born, and as far as Omer was concerned he was stuck with an old fashion French-Canadian name he could not abide that his schoolmates made fun of. When my parents' third son was born, they named him Paul, a name a boy can use anywhere without self-consciousness. My mom used to call him pitsy pois, little pea.

Sister George remains a vivid presence in my memory house, though I never really learned much about her. Like so many of my friends with French-Canadian roots in Keene, I threw off the French language. Sister George reversed the language issue. Though Sister George was a native-born American, she never learned more than a few words in English--"park your ass." For me Sister George is the embodiment of perhaps my greatest regret in life now that I'm pushing age 80, which was running away from my heritage. Father Vac's death when I was a teenager disturbed me for years--poor grades in school, bloody fists fights,



feelings of disassociation from the world I was growing up in. To this day a grief hangs over me, but I now believe that my loss, which I had always thought was in the figure of a person, Father Vac, is only part a greater loss. Call it a confusion of tongues that I've been trying to define with this essay.

Which leads me to an irony in the Vaccarest name. My great-grandfather, who I know as Giovanni Vacarressi, migrated to Nova Scotia from Laspezia, Italy, and eventually ended up in Quebec where his Italian name was given an -e-s-t ending and pronounced Va-cah-yess. But as my mother recalled growing up as Jeannette Vacaless in French Manchester, she was often reminded that Va-cah-yess was not a real French name.

When Giovanni's son, Jean Baptiste, came to the states his Frenchified Italian name was anglicized to Vaccarest. Father Vaccarest was quoted in an interview that the Vaccarest name was a misspelling of Vaccaressi. However, when I told my story to an Italian woman she informed me that Vaccressi is not an Italian name. It's likely that the document I saw with Giovanni's last name and that Father Vaccarest believed was the correct spelling was itself misspelled. So then Va-cah-yess is not French and Vaccaressi is not Italian. However, Vaccarest is thoroughly at home here in the states where foreign names are routinely discombobulated and recombobulated to fit the American tongue.

I shut my eyes and I see my warrior-priest uncle, Father Vac. I see my earthly father, Elphege Hebert, a man with only seven years of education who worked forty-five years in a cotton mill, and who I never really knew until he lived his last years in my house. I see brother Tony who, by the way, now likes to be called Antoine. So, I count that as progress. I see my fictional character Howard Elman, a foundling who, like his creator, did not know nor claimed to care about his past, who eventually learned in *Spoonwood*, book six of the Darby novels, that his name was actually Latour and his roots in North America came from old Acadia. In my books Howard Elman flips off the Latour name, but his son Frederick adopts the name, so his son Birch is not an Elman. Birch Latour and his wife Tess will start a new family dynasty with the Latour name. As one who did not get his consciousness raised about his heritage until middle age, that's the best I've done in my fiction to set things right.

One winter day when I was about twelve or thirteen we had a sudden thaw and a heavy rain that flooded the Church and school parking lot, which also served as our playground. That night temperatures plunged and the next morning the water had frozen solid. I had a nice view of the frozen parking lot from my classroom upstairs.

I watched as two nuns in their black, flowing gowns and giant white bibs left the convent and started toward the ice. One nun appeared to be limping. As they came closer to my eye I identified the limping nun as Sister Gregory, who had been my sixth grade teacher and a favorite of mine.

The other sister gave Sister Gregory a push. Suddenly, she shot forward, spun, twirled, moved with dazzling speed. I thought for a moment that she would rise into the sky on the wind. Sister Gregory was on ice skates.

She navigated the entire "rink" with incredible grace. Something came over me that I did not understand, but that was overwhelming and beautiful. The feeling was too good. We Catholics weren't supposed to feel this kind of elation in the earthly realm. I resolved not to tell anybody about it, afraid that somehow I had sinned with this new feeling. You see, even though I didn't believe in the Baltimore Catechism God I did believe in sin. It wasn't until years later that I realized that the feeling I had experienced was the feeling of falling in love.

Jump ahead two decades at a time when I was writing a piece about Sister Gregory for *The Boston Globe* op-ed page. Sister Gregory was in her eighties and had retired only a year earlier. She was living in a nice little apartment in Portsmouth, NH. She was full of vitality with a somewhat sardonic outlook on the world that of course I would not have noticed when I was a boy.

"Why of course I could skate--I'm from Burln'," she said, pronouncing the Berlin the New Hampshire way. Here's the part relevant to my story today. She made a strong point that the sisterhood had been the right choice for her. She had only one quarrel with the Church, the name that was given to her. "My name is not Gregory," she said with emphasis. "It's Isabelle."

It was on the drive home from that interview when I had a sudden image in my mind of my aunt, Sister George, the sweet little face, her black nun's habit, the pendant around her neck with the cross clutched in her hand. I suddenly realized that I didn't even know Sister George's given name.

Thanks to some research by my good friend Robert Perreault of Manchester I now know my aunt's name. It was Marie (hyphen) Anne, that's Ann with an "e."

# Résonance

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Volume 2

Article 6

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2020

## Parallax

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### Recommended Citation

Kadetsky, Elizabeth N. (2020) "Parallax," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/6>

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## Parallax

by Elizabeth Kadetsky

In Grandmaman's art room you couldn't see the floor. Everything was organized according to category—paint tubes, buttons in plastic trays, beads in plastic trays, toilet paper cylinders, egg cartons, six-pack rings, wax paper Pop-tart wrappers. To walk through, you followed a path from door to easel and from easel to palette table. A clutter of boxes and Publishers Clearing House sweepstakes entry forms spilled out from there into the living room and lay piled up along the walls, joining two- and three-D artworks, hurricane lamps, and tchotchkes. Grandmaman liked to sing Piaf:

*A quoi ça sert, l'amour?*

*On raconte toujours*

*Des histoires insensées*

*A quoi ça sert d'aimer?*

Grandmaman slept next to the art room in a bedroom on the first floor, which emitted a constant murmur from a small black-and-white TV. Grandpapa slept alone in the master bedroom upstairs—Grandpapa's room—where in the mornings Jill and I could hear him performing a hundred pushups, after which he emerged broad-chested in a Hanes V-neck and announced there were Pop-tarts for breakfast.

Evenings, Grandmaman and he argued—about Carter or the oil wars or her right to her bottle. “*Mon dieu,*” she wailed if he asked her for something, or, “*C'est si bon,*” she'd say,

ignoring him. Uncle Phil came to visit at night and also argued with her—and with Grandpapa—more or less about the same topics. Eventually, Grandpapa went to bed and Phil left for home—with his English shepherd, Margaret, and sometimes his pretty blond girlfriend, Val. And then Jill, Grandmaman, and I giggled, played cards, wrestled, and did crafts.

One Christmas-time, Jill and I came to Grandmaman and Grandpapa's in Wakefield ahead of our mother, who would arrive from our home in New York City a few days later. We'd come from our father's in Brookline. As usual, someone got lost driving us or picking us up. I think this time it was our father who cursed the streets of the city he'd known from birth for their roundabouts and flyovers and zigzag detours and lackluster signage. Boston was a city of insiders, each from his private enclave.

I remember how the art room had an easel with an oil still-life featuring two pears and an onion, while the actual objects sat posed on the other side of the room. The objects seemed crowded and uncomfortable, edged between a roll of canvas and a box of beach glass. The painting, though, had air inside it. It looked more real than real.

About this chaos, I thought: *I want to be an artist.*

The night before our mother's arrival, Grandmaman lay on the emerald green sofa in the living room underneath several of her multicolored, hand-crocheted afghans. She invited Jill and me to a tickle contest and then a toe-biting contest. Next, she brought out trays of beads and instructed Jill and me to help her string them onto long nylon threads for a beaded curtain between the dining room and kitchen.

There was no dinner. We ate store-bought sweets and snacks from the fridge when we were hungry. I loved every minute. Or perhaps my memory is playing tricks on me.

The next day, Grandpapa took his black Lincoln Continental to pick up our mother at South Station. Phil, Val, and Margaret waited with us. I think it was around this time I began noticing the world shift. I saw through a parallax vision. *Child. Adult. Child. Adult.* I was discovering how to make the slide, to match mindset to moment. I observed Phil and Val and Margaret one way, and then the other: Phil plays with the dog; Phil argues politics with the TV. It was as if he were two different Phils.

It was late afternoon. To mark our mother's arrival Grandmaman had dressed with a frilly bow in her curly, charcoal hair, and in a long coat constructed from a velvet bathrobe with glass chandelier crystals, snatches of lace, and ribbons attached. Margaret barked with excitement, and Phil and Val said, "*Shush now, Maah-gret, Maah-gret! Shush now!*" The house smelled of cigar.

Finally, the latch on the door of the old Tudor clicked open, and we rushed to greet the newcomers. What did Grandmaman pour to celebrate my mother's arrival? I didn't notice. "No, Mum," my mother said, shouldering off her leather Bomber jacket. Someone had given it to her, size extra-large for men, so it reached down to her hipbone and showed off the straight line of her rayon pants down to her heels. "You don't need to start so early, Mum," my mother said, still shouldering herself out of the bomber jacket, with Grandpapa's help now. Phil grabbed my mother in a hug and patted her butt. "No underwear!" he cried.

I was still a kid, though, in this moment, or chose to be one. Grandmaman's bottle looked like the bottles from *Scooby Doo*. I imagined it with a cartoon label: *B*, for Bottle. I never really thought about it, what was in Grandmaman's bottle.

Jill, our mother, and I would leave the next day, the twenty-fourth, to have our own Christmas Eve in New York. My adult self had a small glimmer of understanding that our mother actually cared about Christmas and wanted hers alone, that is, with just Jill and me.

Tonight, Grandpapa would take everyone to the country club for lobster. This would be nice, my mother kept saying. Jill's and my other grandparents said that our French grandparents spoiled us with things like lobster dinners. But I felt no guilt. Worse was leaving behind Margaret. She barked as we left, excluded from the celebrations. Jill and I watched Val as we piled into the car—her Frye boots, her long blond hair, her Wrangler jeans. She was wonderful.

Grandpapa pulled up to the curb to let us out before he parked. "Such a gentleman, Dad," my mother said to him as she stepped from the backseat. "I love a gentleman." It was very cold when we stepped into the air and onto the iced pavement.

Inside, our group sat at a giant, round, white-clothed table. Jill and I were across from each other and sent each other eyebrow raises when the lobsters arrived—seven lurid red beasts with their claws reaching out to us as if to congratulate us for our daring.

Phil sat on one side of me, Grandpapa on the other, so their argument flew across me—about gas prices, the Mideast, and Anwar Sadat. Phil was tall, thin, and blond—like a more handsome Shawn Cassidy. Jill waved a lobster leg and torpedoed a butter drop in my direction. There was drinking, I suppose. *What?* Scotch? Red wine? Gin martinis?

After a while, the lobsters had been defeated and the arguments called as truces. We walked into the cold and dark outside the country club. Our mother instructed Jill and me to thank Grandpapa for dinner.

*"Thank you for dinner!"*



*“Thank you for dinner!”*

He gathered us together in a giant hug. “I love you!” he cried. And we loved him back. He was so elegant, with his olive French complexion and long nose, his sensitive green eyes that were sparkly aquamarine like mine—or at least everyone said so.

“I love a tall man,” my mother said, grabbing him in an escort-style elbow lock.

Who was with us when we discussed the car? I was not aware. I saw the ground iced with old snow, and white mounds at the shoulders hardened into ice-drifts. My gloved hand was in my mother’s, and my grandfather said he’d get the car.

“What a gentleman!” my mother repeated. “I love it when a man goes around to get the car. Classy. Classy. You’re a classy guy, Dad.” She kissed him on a cheek and locked arms tighter with him. She was as tall as he; they were quite the stunning pair. “You’re such a handsome fella, Dad. I love you, Dad. What a good man. Good looking too. I’ve found the perfect man.”

And I filter. I ask now, Where were Phil and Val? Where was Grandmaman?

Grandpapa brought around the Lincoln, and Jill, our mother, and I filed into the back. We huddled toward one side in the back to make room for Val and Grandmaman. Our mother sat between us and held our hands. I looked behind the car and remembered the sharp bite of the cold outside and felt the respite of huddling together in the backseat with the car heater blowing dry wind at us. My grandfather’s breathing was hard. Billowing white balls of breath emitted from the muffler tube. Perhaps this was the moment when everything turned.

Phil came out of the country club entrance. He held Grandmaman with a firm arm over her shoulder and led her while Val trailed behind holding two purses. Grandmaman’s

bow was crooked in her charcoal hair, and the bathrobe-coat was off-kilter, held up by only one shoulder. The chandelier crystals sparkled with a reflection off the snow. Then Grandmaman turned on him and spit words at Phil and shook him off her. She walked past the car and into the parking lot, as if in a trance. Phil followed her. I could tell they were arguing because there were streams of white breath coming out of each of their mouths, hers moving in a forward direction, his aimed at the back of her head.

In my memory I see Grandmaman as a silhouette, a dreamlike figure in a long, cloak-like coat, her hair very active. I squint my eyes and imagine her as a nymph-like, forest creature.

They circled the parking lot. Then, my vision of her shifted, and a word, *alcoholic*, popped. I suddenly got it that Grandmaman was drunk, and that everyone was thinking about this too. I knew that my grandfather was disgusted and couldn't stand my grandmother and that my uncle was telling her, "Ma you want to do that? Then the world will see you," and my mother was embarrassed and angry and ashamed. My mother's eyes were closed. Grandpapa was staring very fiercely into the windshield, the angle of his gaze slightly askew from Grandmaman. The narrative of the nice dinner, the chivalric collecting of the car, the kissy-huggy congratulating—this was a decoy story, not the real plot of the tale at all.

I chose the other view again, the child's, and watched my grandmother as a nymph. It was as if I was looking at that drawing that morphs between a young woman and an old woman. You can see it one way, then the other, and then you have a hard time seeing it the first way again. I got a parallax feeling, like I was floating. And then, it was as if an avalanche washed over me as a new storyline took shape around my old memories of my

grandmother. The plot linking them together was different with this new key. She did *that* because she was drunk. And *that*, and *that*.

“What’s happening?” I challenged everyone in the car. I’d been betrayed.

No one answered.

My mother gripped my hand. Her anxiety transmuted into me.

Phil walked back to the car and slammed the door to the passenger seat behind him and didn’t say anything, and we continued to wait. Val stood under the awning shivering in the cold with the two purses, and Grandmaman continued to drift through the parking lot. I saw her as a belligerent drunk. I couldn’t shift the image back to the sprite again.

\*

Now, I think of the silence of that moment. The five of us are holding our breaths. The car is aloft, floating in a timeless, in-between-the-instants-of-reality moment, as if it—and all of us inside, and the reality of the thing itself—have for a second simply stopped existing. We have disappeared. We have glided between the raindrops and found a hole in the corner of the universe. As long as we can all hold our breaths, we can keep that car aloft, and this experience will never exist within the bounds of a real, actual world. None of us is here, and yet we occupy a blissful no-place together.

I know where my mother went that night; she taught me how to get there, after all.

\*

My mother always disappeared. Eventually, the disappearances came to seem a way of life. The space between one disappearance and the next began to get shorter, and the length of each grew longer. If, once, the disappearances represented who my mother *wasn't* to me, eventually they came to symbolize who she was. I think I was in college when I had this understanding. She was forty-three when I left for school, forty-eight when I graduated.

“Your mother always had Alzheimer’s!” her friend Chris told me recently. Jill and I always said our mother practiced selective amnesia. But early onset Alzheimer’s is known to be genetic in most cases, and the genealogy charts on both sides of my mother’s French Catholic family go back to the settlement of Québec. My mother herself has nearly a hundred first and second cousins. There are enough alcoholics in the family to see distinctive genetic—or cultural?—trends, and yet there are no reports of Alzheimer’s aside from Grandmaman’s alcohol dementia. So maybe what I noticed when my mother was in her forties was something else.

Answers won’t change the present, the fact my mother seems to have an incurable disease, a horrifying illness that kills by eating away at the brain, deteriorating the past. Answers don’t change that. I do know that I believe she had these lapses because she wanted to disappear. If this is not important to the probing of her life, surely it is to mine.

\*

My mother has just turned sixty-eight and retired from her job. I know that Jill has brought her for memory testing at NYU. I know that my mother bought a new scarf and then loaned it to me when I saw her right afterwards because it was cold and then she

forgot it ever existed and insisted it wasn't hers when I tried to return it to her. I know that she and Jill are fighting about small things like keys in the freezer and a wallet in the oven and a lost MetroCard. But I don't yet have a name or a word or an image to organize these impressions and reports. I know that my mother is casting for words as well. "My memory..." she says. "But don't worry. I won't, you know..."

*Forget me...* I finish her sentence silently.

One day I call and she says, "Well I've very much enjoyed our conversation. Thank you very much for calling." And she hangs up on me. Next time, she can't believe how long it's been since she's seen me, but it's only been since Monday. "How are you? Where are you? I so much want to give you a—hig. I mean a hug. A hug and a kiss. A hig." While I'm on the phone with her, Jill, who's in the same room with her, texts me: *right now she's having a jolly fake talk with you after tormenting me for 2 hours. PHONY!!*

When my mother and I take a trip to Wakefield together shortly after, I really see. We pull up to Grandmaman's old Tudor, and I remember the winters here, like arid desert without the heat. It's windswept and barren. With so little moisture, it's as if there's no air. Sun beats down on the tarmac and turns the black pavement iridescent with newly melted ice. I think, *It's still winter*. I think, *It's always winter in Massachusetts, so damned cold*. Snowdrifts are charcoaled from car exhaust and hardened into barriers shiny, smooth and stone-solid. Frost has window-paned over the slate walkway.

I see a plain truth. My mother has Alzheimer's, or something—maybe strokes.

We've come to see Phil. Val died of lung cancer three years ago. Phil and Val's daughter—my cousin Nicole—is in her first year of med school. Grandpapa died in 1986. In 2005 Grandmaman died—of old age or alcohol dementia. She was ninety-one or ninety-

two. Earlier, she transferred the house to Phil and my mother. There was no will, or no will materialized. Phil moved into the house, and my mother doesn't know how to talk to Phil about getting her share of the inheritance. She suspects she is ill, and she's worried about being able to afford care.

We stay in Grandpapa's room. Phil acts like he doesn't notice my mother's condition. She is disoriented and blank. I've never seen her this absent. We sit on Phil's new leather sofas and chat—only she stares at me the whole time feigning comprehension and occasionally putting on a facial gesture. Why is Phil pretending, too?

My mother goes to bed early, and I bring up the house with Phil. He says things like, *I think maybe I saw an appraisal sometime, and, Maybe I saw a will somewhere.* I notice that his lips are very thin and that they are stuck in a straight line across. I go to bed.

Upstairs, my mother is asleep in one of the two twin beds, and she has all the objects from my suitcase spread over her body—a neck pillow, a yoga block, socks and underwear. She sits up and sleep talks. “Whose house is this?” she asks no one.

In the house, the bead curtain is still there. Phil has said that Grandmaman's collections and paintings are in the basement. Later, I ask Phil if I can take something home from the basement to remind me of Grandmaman, since this is the first time I've been here since her death. I think this means clearly a painting, but maybe I wasn't clear enough. He goes down and brings me back up a bag of yarn. I ask for needles. He finds some. I knit. My mother stares at the bundle in my hands, and Phil watches me too. Yarn and yearn, two words so close.

After breakfast, my mother and I go outside. Walking, she asks me what we're doing. I laugh, because I already told her several times.

“Stop,” she barks back. “Just stop. This is really difficult. Can’t you see?”

Then we stay quiet. At a certain point she holds out her hands and stops walking.

“Wait a minute,” she says. “Something just happened.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. It was weird. It’s like there’s an echo in my head and this strange... *thing...* out there.” She gestures to the space around her body.

“What is it?”

“It’s like this isn’t my body.”

To draw the parallel that is extending out in my mind as she says this—between the particular character of her separating from her body then and the particular and obviously different character of her disembodiment now—feels to reduce things. And yet in fact I too am floating, and so the thought gets lost and becomes vague and impressionistic and unliteral. I feel my heart has stopped and my breath has stopped and that I am both up in the air and here on the sidewalk with its centuries’-old granite rock wall. I feel that chill, that New England chill. It’s always so damned cold here, I think.

# Résonance

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Volume 2

Article 7

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2020

## Ste. Therese

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### Recommended Citation

Marion, Paul (2020) "Ste. Therese," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 7.

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**Ste. Thérèse**

**by Paul Marion**

My family belonged to a French Catholic parish in Dracut, Massachusetts: *Ste. Thérèse*. Known as the Little Flower of Jesus, *Thérèse* of Lisieux in France is pictured on holy cards as a beautiful young Carmelite nun with a dark veil and high white collar around her delicate throat. She is usually portrayed holding a crucifix and a bouquet of roses. Her life model was the child Jesus of Nazareth. She is remembered as simple, humble, patient, kind, and pure—a perfect even if impossible example of a loving and genial youth in the eyes of French Catholic parents. She wrote holy poetry. Therese was twenty-four when she died of tuberculosis in 1897.

In her autobiography, completed just before she died, she writes: “I have never given to the good God anything but love. He will return that love. After my death I will let fall a ceaseless shower of roses upon earth.” She is considered extraordinary among Catholic saints because of the vast following she won after being canonized in 1925. She was young, she was an ideal, she delivered miracles, and she was French, which made her a rock star among the Franco-American faithful.

Soon after *Ste. Thérèse* parish was founded due to an overflow of French families from *St. Louis de France* parish in the Centralville neighborhood of Lowell, the next-door city, there were grand prayer sessions with Catholics coming in buses for the healing services at a grotto built to honor the saint before the church was constructed. When I started school in 1960, the side altars in the church were hung with crutches and braces of those believed to have been cured through her intercession. In the artificial grotto between the church and the parish school, a plaster cast of the saint lay in a glass-covered case set among flowering bushes and a stone shrine.

*Soeur Thérèse de L’Enfant Jesus* taught me in the first grade. How old was she? Maybe 22? The Sisters of the Assumption held us to a godly standard. In addition to the basic subjects, English-

Math-History-Geography-Science, we studied French grammar and practiced speaking French. At least once, we were assigned a nun who spoke only French. That made Geography a higher hill to climb. Fortunately, the maps and textbook were in English. On Thursdays, for a few years, half the classes were taught in French. In the play yard, a student could earn a *jeton*, meaning you got a little credit ticket redeemable for something of value if you said a sentence in French to the nun on patrol during recess. The something of value might be a holy card of a glow-in-the-dark statue of St. Joseph carrying a hammer. There would be a small flock of model students hovering around the nun outside during the thirty-minute lunch break. With all that training, plus four years of French classes in high school and two semesters of grammar refreshing in college (I did not do well because I had been doing mostly reading and conversation in high school classes)—with all that in the language bank I still lost my fluency in French for lack of use.

If I was dropped down into Montreal or Paris for three months, I think the skill would work its way forward from a network of deep brain caves. I can read well enough to get a sense of what's going on. Writing is a struggle, although I had fun in the 2000s writing poems back and forth with a Canadian writer with whom I was engaged in a poetry challenge tied to the hockey playoffs with the Bruins battling Montreal's *Canadiens*. If Montreal won, I had to write a poem in French, and François Pelletier was required to compose in English if the Bruins prevailed. Crazy as it sounds, we wound up on nationwide public radio in Canada being interviewed about our poetry "face off." We did this for two playoff series and collected the poems in a chapbook published by bookstore-owner Richard Gingras in Montreal (Librairie Le Chercheur de trésors)—popular enough to warrant a second printing. Both of us deviated from the original rules and wrote in French and English with all the associated fractures and foolishness.

By the end of my eighth grade in the school, the crumbling grotto had been removed, opening up the barrier between the girls' yard and boys' yard, which was major progress in our eyes.

Keeping the sexes apart at playtime had been consistent with the teaching of moral purity it would seem, even before the adolescent download of hormones that set us on our way to teen-age. Of course, all the blockades and warning signals still had not prevented a Bernadette from taking a rawhide bracelet from a Eugene on the school bus going home.

We were young Catholics when the altar in church had been turned around, allowing the priest to look at the congregation during the Mass, and, second, the language of the service changed to English from Latin which had been the liturgical language all our lives. In most cases the traditional altar remained in place while a simple long table draped in the appropriate cloth had been installed for a forward-facing holy celebration. These dramatic outward changes had emerged from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), a worldwide event. Convened by Pope John XXIII, the proceedings registered like a Constitutional Convention in the secular nation. The goals and objectives were high-minded and complex, much of which was lost on us, but we took the visible result as modernization. And now only an invisible line separated the boys' and girls' yards. The old-world grip loosened on past rules and procedures. When the bishop withdrew the longstanding ban on eating meat on Fridays, we knew the modern world had arrived. That weekly penance, abstaining from something as simple as a pork chop, had been a way to remind Catholics that strength of spiritual character matters. We believed Jesus had suffered and died on earth to ensure we could have everlasting life in Catholic heaven. "Suffer it up," one of my aunts would say.

The big losers were the fresh-fish markets and fish-fry places like Nichols' on Lakeview Avenue in Lowell where my mother had worked part-time for a short while. On Fridays, the line of customers stretched out to the sidewalk. Happy, hungry, obedient Catholics emerged with their oil-stained brown paper bags of fried haddock and hand-cut French fries. Overnight, hamburgers were allowed on Fridays. Ham sandwiches instead of tuna fish salad. No more tomato-rice soup with saltines in the school cafeteria on Fridays.

The reforms, the changes, made it easier for me to choose public high school rather than continued Catholic education like my brother David had done at St. Joseph's in Lowell. He walked a mile to a bus stop on Lakeview Avenue and then took a bus (two buses) into Lowell his first year, and later car-pooled with Skippy Paquette who lived up the hill off Janice Ave. Our older brother Richard had broken the pattern and gone to Dracut High after going to school for eight years with the nuns. David had made his own decision. My parents had no problem with me choosing public school.

While I may not have been able to articulate in eighth grade the lasting effects of Catholic instruction and Jesus' example, I can say now that the models of simple kindness towards others and long practice of interior reflection have stayed with me all this time. (For reflection, we sat quietly at our desks and examined our souls before walking the short distance to the church where we would confess sins and be absolved of wrongdoing by the priest.) Parochial school spoke to the metaphysical in life. We contended with sin, eternity, mysteries, and miraculous healing. That's big for ten-year-olds.

Ralph Waldo Emerson writes that the young in New England of the early 1800s "were born with knives in their brain, a tendency to introversion, self-dissection, anatomizing of motives." Reform movements would follow as engaged individuals contested established structures and ways of being and acting. They were alert for the transcendent. In our own way, using the Catholic map, my classmates were shown a direct route to the supreme, the ultimate, the invisible unknown source of the universe. The nuns encouraged us to speak to God, to pray, even if much of our expression was mimicry. The repeated practice developed in us a spiritual muscle-memory with the potential to flex in an authentic moment and draw a clarifying insight from the mind.

Many years ago, while driving north on Pawtucket Boulevard along the Merrimack River, I had a moment that I can't fully explain. All of a sudden, passing the Heritage Ice Cream Stand, my

brain gave me an image of a seemingly endless sequence of open doors, one swinging open onto another in a receding line, that is, going away from me in the direction toward which I drove. Although I was looking at the road ahead, my mind's eye was seeing something else above tree height. I could have been looking at a movie scene. If this was a satori moment out of Buddhist culture, it was almost embarrassingly ordinary. Doors opening? More important than what I was seeing, however, was the feeling of "getting it."

Words are not adequate in describing the sensation of understanding. "Okay, I see what this all means" was unstated in my brain. I felt an overall sense of coherence as if a secret explanation had been revealed to me. I'm not sure I can interpret the message, if that's what it was, but I've come to think of it as "Everything is connected" and "Way leads on to way" (as Robert Frost writes in a poem). There was something ecological and holistic about the vision, if it can be given such a high-status label.

Midway through high school I told my parents that I would not go to Sunday church services anymore. They objected, and so I walked to the early Mass by myself for about three months, complaining all the way, after which the struggle subsided. I didn't want the ritual anymore. The authorities may have made a mistake with me by forcing me to go along with the system for so many years. I didn't have a choice, really. For a reason or reasons unknown to me my father had dropped out (or been kicked out) of the junior seminary in New Hampshire at about the same age that I quit the church ceremonies and rejected the dogma. He remained a populist Catholic who saw the wisdom in Christ's teachings as presented in the New Testament of the Bible. At the same time, he was anti-clerical and skeptical of the claimed sacramental powers of priests. "Those guys have no magic," he said. "They like having a big new car and a housekeeper in the rectory. The church should sell all its gold and use the money to help poor people."

In the late Seventies, I worked on a poem about a different Therese, also a Carmelite sister, Spanish mystic St. Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582) whom I had become fascinated with after reading about her life. I made eight pages of handwritten notes as I researched and used these to write a poem that I sent to the *Paris Review*, one of the many literary journals I submitted work to in those years. Sister Teresa grew up in a Christian family with some Jewish lineage, people with resources but not wealthy, in mountainous Spain, Castile.

As a child she was head-strong and once ran away with her brother, hoping to be martyred for her faith. When she joined a convent at sixteen, the other sisters thought her to be happy. Ailments plagued her from teenage years to age forty-five. Teresa associated her bodily trials with Christ's sufferings. Teresa's ecstatic seizures set her apart as a figure in rapture. She believed her extreme physical episodes were spiritually sparked. My poem ends: "a mad Fire gets the bones as if marrow were to luminesce / with the light of a thousand suns. / The body brims in cool peace, aching to stay lit, aching to release, alive, / hot blood in a jar of ice." Productive beyond compare, she established more than thirty convents and monasteries while teaching and writing a sprawling autobiography—maybe the first Western woman to write this way.

My Teresa poem came back from *Paris Review* with a form rejection slip on which poetry editor Jonathan Galassi had written: "I found 'St. Teresa' impressive and would like to see more work from you." He made a few suggestions on the poem typescript and added, "Is this finished?" I made the changes and sent back the poem with a few others—but he didn't take anything. It was a big step for me, though, to get the attention of an elite editor. I was twenty-six years old.

St. Therese of France. One early winter morning, I went downstairs to the lower level of the townhouse on a former ski hill in Amesbury, Mass., where I live with my wife Rosemary, to get a better look at two deer grazing in the rain on the slope shorn of its brushy summer plenitude. Mild air had melted the snow cover to give the animals a clean shot at the still-green scrubby grass and

nubs of plants. The slope was a lighter gold tint of the deer themselves in between the last of the weeds.

While down there I pulled from one of the glass-doored barrister bookcases a hardcover of Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* minus dust jacket, a first-edition copy I had picked up for \$20 years ago in a Portsmouth, New Hampshire, antiquarian bookshop. I opened it and began reading about Ray Smith in the California boxcar with the "St. Teresa bum" who'd torn the shower-of-roses prayer from a newspaper to carry in his pocket. I don't know why Kerouac anglicized Therese's name in this story. Like a lot of the Lowell French Canadians, he had a soft spot for Thérèse of Lisieux. I can't prove it, but he may have made "Martin" the family name in his sprawling first novel *The Town and the City* as a quiet tribute to *Thérèse Martin* of Lisieux who encouraged humility and simple love of one another. Still thinking of her, Ray heats a solitary monk's supper of beans and cheese-macaroni in the small wood fire on the beach on the outskirts of Santa Barbara.

It's a damn fine story that makes me nostalgic because of all the Kerouac water under my bridge at sixty-five years old, almost twenty years longer than he got on Earth. In the quiet of the morning on the high hill in Amesbury, looking at the deer in back of our townhouse, I felt the loss of things gone by. All the current cultural critique of Jack as misogynistic and racially presumptuous or worse fell away and what remained was the voice of a man saying what it was like to be alive in his moment of the twentieth century. A man from my first neighborhood and parish where I was baptized, from my ethnic people, a man who could have been swapped out for one of my uncles, especially Francis Roy, Pinky, who lived a bounce-around Kerouac life, going from the Second World War in Europe as a kid, practically, to learning from my grandfather Marion how to cut meat in a butcher shop, which gave him a marketable trade his whole life, and then taking his young family on the road. He tried on for size the Southwest and Southeast.

In Orlando, Florida, he cut meat in a corner market frequented by none other than Kerouac. Pinky would fix homestyle Franco-American specialties like *corton* (a poor man's *pâté*, ground pork with spices), jellied head cheese, and blood sausage for Jack, the two guys from *St. Louis de France* parish in Lowell howling over the coincidence of finding each other. In the Sunshine state, Kerouac was scribbling his "Orlando Blues" and drinking highballs at happy hour with his mother, Gabe.

Pinky liked his beverages, played the horses, and spent later years in New Hampshire with a longtime woman friend who looked after him and made sure he got to the Veterans hospital for medical services. He died there, leaving his son Robert, a successful attorney in Los Angeles, and daughter Priscilla, whom I know less about. I haven't been good about keeping up with my California cousins.

Pinky had thick dark hair like Jack's and could tell a story worthy of a stand-up comic or raconteur from Quebec. He'd have everyone choking from laughs with his tales and crazy voices. He wore sunglasses and flashed a wide, white-toothed smile. The style was Rat Pack and Las Vegas of 1960. My mother, his oldest sister, used to say he fell in with older sketchy guys as a boy soldier and never recovered from their wayward ways. I don't know about that. He was not going to be contained in the limited mill city of Lowell, Massachusetts. He wanted a baby-blue Cadillac convertible, laughs, wife and kids, enough money, lively friends, and the high life where the orange groves shine with fruit. In the end, he went back home where the maple trees make sap for syrup.



2020

## Review Essay: Five books of poetry by Connie Voisine

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### Recommended Citation

Paige, Abby (2020) "Review Essay: Five books of poetry by Connie Voisine," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 15.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/15>

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## Review Essay: Five books of poetry by Connie Voisine

*The Bower* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 71 p., ISBN 9780226613789; *And God Created Women* (Durham, NC: Bull City Press, 2018) 33 p., ISBN 9781495178818; *Calle Florista* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015) 64 p., ISBN 9780226295329; *Rare High Meadow of Which I Might Dream* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 59 p., ISBN 9780226863528; *Cathedral of the North* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 67 p., ISBN 9780822957379.

It is no mistake that Connie Voisine's latest poetry collection, *The Bower*, consists of a single, book-length poem. In it, a visitor to Northern Ireland documents her travels while contemplating that country's history of sectarian violence. There may be no better way to contemplate the volatility of borders than to remove them, creating a book that embodies the idea that the divisions we create — between poems, as well as neighborhoods, religions, peoples — are both rhetorical and real, realities we create through rhetoric. Within a poetry book, the effect is meaningful. While there are sometimes page breaks between stanzas in *The Bower*, suggesting major caesuras between thoughts, these shifts are not great enough to demand a change in diction or form. The whole book is arranged in free verse couplets, in the voice of a single speaker. It hangs together as a single train of thought and feels fresh in its patient unfolding.

Voisine's American visitor to Belfast sees Northern Ireland as a country populated by ghosts and survivors, haunted by its recent and distant pasts. Tracing the very local and specific dynamics of The Troubles and their legacy, she also reveals the startlingly personal implications of the human tendency to divide self from other, us from them. *The Bower* explores relationships between neighbors, how pedestrian hate can be, and how hate, like love, is a kind of bond.

The poem's protagonist travels with her small child, to whom she must explain everything they encounter: police tape, schoolyard questions about religious affiliation, casual references to violence and bereavement. The child, "D," is a useful foil, asking the right naïve questions. At bedtime, she and her mother read a book of Irish legends, where a king's children are stolen from him and turned into swans by their jealous stepmother:

[...] Before drifting off  
D performs the tasks for safe passage—kiss the bear, flip the pillow,  
turn on the night-light teacher gave for being good—then asks me,  
*When did this story happen?* The books say it's one of the three  
great tragedy narratives from before St. Patrick and in those days  
sorrow was not known in Ireland. I tell her, *Before everything.* (12-13)

The daughter's presence heightens the mother's vulnerability, and her innocent exertions to make sense of what she sees heightens the apparent senselessness of *The Troubles*. In one instance, after they visit a museum, the mother asks the child what she thought of a display they saw of portraits of survivors. The child's answer:

... *It might help*

*to have sounds and things you can touch. What kinds of things?  
I don't know, her hair, some clothes, the bomb? (9)*

The parent-child relationship is essential to how Voisine explores the themes of violence and clannishness here. In trying to apply order and meaning to a history of murder and mayhem, the mother continually rediscovers how profoundly chaotic the world is — the world into which she has brought this child. What other love reduces us to our most animal?

What were you thinking, bringing a child into this knowing  
called the world? What could she learn from you, one  
who deep inside your murky soul agrees it matters  
who was shot, that you'd do awful things to save her. (50)

The mother's conflict, between her desire to protect her daughter from the harsh realities of the world and the inevitable obligation to initiate her into them, personalizes the tensions that surround the visitors. Yet it is the family's position of remove, of which the poem's speaker is ever conscious, that really animates the narrative. This distance, from her position as "the uninformed / American so clearly without a dog in the fight" (43), makes it possible for the speaker to move and empathize across sectarian lines. Indeed, empathy is the axis upon which the poem/book turns, as its protagonist struggles to understand other people's loves and hatreds, how strange they seem, even as she feels her own so viscerally. "I want to know more, what is this kind of remembering?" she says of a young man's promise to never forget the sacrifices his forefathers made for a united Ireland. But she also admits, "I know this fever, intractable" (18).

*The Bower* appears at a moment when sectarianism is a drug of choice around the world, Brexit and its ominous Irish backstop the relevant examples here. This lends the book a certain urgency, but one that Voisine doesn't exploit so much as abstracts. She is interested in the contested Irish border as the site of particular events, but also as a metaphor for many other

sites of conflict, for places where subjectivities fail to overlap and where truth fragments into differing perspectives. One of the most lyrically exciting passages of the poem begins:

The epistemology of, nature and scope, the hedge  
the boundary of garden, bog field, the high field,  
and the paddock field. Won't you dissect the field  
of knowledge of the Modern Mistress stove, the wee tap  
on the side, granny had on in the very spot closest  
to Scotland (eighteen miles) in all the North... (54)

Where does one field become another? How do we tell where one thing ends and another begins? The diction here mimics this confusion. As sentences split and interrupt each other, the speaker reaches for narrative order through an uncertainty about what is real and true, until finally settling on a kind of half-explanation:

...according to evidentialism, there is  
materialist proof of all the Belfasts and their existence,  
the existence of her French doll, wooden and hollow  
as a spool, the crown of nails for knitting. Luminosity  
of cognition is this antler pocketknife purchased with leftover  
wedding money whilst on a honeymoon on the Golden Mile,  
and let's just call this noble photo of her father in his brass-button  
uniform true, if only by accident or testimony or love. (54-55)

Truth is a product of "accident or testimony or love," which makes it as changeable as any of those. Voisine strives to make visible "all the Belfasts," a prismatic picture of a place divided as much by conceptual and experiential borders as by physical ones.



This interest in the boundary between self and other, between your truth and mine, has threaded through all five of the poetry collections Voisine has produced in the past twenty years. She often plays in the balance between identification and alienation, searching for the place where subjectivities overlap. Her poetry is often written from a fish-out-of-water perspective, in the voices of travelers and visitors, strangers in strange lands. Her speakers' position as outsiders often lends them a startled self-awareness and a clarity of vision.

2015's *Calle Florista* focused on another contested border, the one between the southern United States and northern Mexico. (Voisine teaches at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces.) It's a long way from Ireland, but there are striking similarities: the violence used

to enforce the border; the influence of Catholic ritual and iconography; questions about the translatability of language and experience; and speakers who, finding themselves away from home, experience their surroundings through the lens of isolation. “After the First Road” interrogates wanderlust:

...Surely I must know grief flocks  
to any surface, those in motion as well:

the slipper of wind, electric lines driving and  
rising, the smooth pates of fields,  
and the moon punctuating, *Oh*.

After the first road, I admit I’m no longer  
going home. To keep from the next,  
from the rapt syntax of go, to stop

gorging on the gorgeous, royal unknown,  
quit the addiction of the clean slate,  
I must try harder. (31)

The speaker has left home, and even while her griefs have followed, newness has an enduring, addictive appeal. But there are dangerous, even violent, implications to seeing an unfamiliar place as “a clean slate.” The visitor should beware of the path she cuts through unfamiliar territory, as the poet acknowledges in “New World”:

I knew a lot, once.  
Wasn’t Naturalism about to happen?  
And really, the French and the English,  
why should they quit—a battle here, one there,  
and their navies refulgent?  
And that man, saying such things:  
“the night is the very experience of *there is*.”  
Once I knew  
that pastries could have a thousand leaves.  
The bishop wore a fabulous hat,  
and forks and knives  
were polished monthly to meditate  
in their velvet boxes.

Here the sky represents nothing  
but blue, and we go along  
inventing new ways of dying:  
by the cutting off of hands,  
of hair, death by one dirty blanket, and  
death by walking.  
Death by six pine nuts, by bloody  
sunset, by obscure mirage. (15-16)

Here, as above, the speaker slips free of what she used to know — signifiers of wealth, culture, and status — and discovers a world without established metaphors. “Here the sky represents nothing,” but that blank slate is vulnerable to the inventions of a “we” that has abandoned all it once knew. With this gesture, shifting from the singular to the plural, Voisine links the individual’s hunt for novel experience with the violent history of colonialism.

Voisine’s strongest poems rack focus this way, expanding from the internal to a very broad view, locating the lyric in a narrative context. While her work is often narrative, it plays less with the sequential, ordering work of narrative — what Tony Hoagland has called “the grammar of the experience” (184) — and more with its perspectival distance, how we look at our surroundings and how they change our self-perception. Voisine’s poems don’t tell stories as much as they investigate the storytelling process, revealing where the speaker is positioned within the narrative and how the story is changed by her presence. She balances in the space between self and other to see whether that distance can be bridged or, at least, made visible.

In her 2001 debut, *Cathedral of the North*, it was the distance of memory that she sought to traverse. This book, too, was located on a border, at the rural, working class, French-speaking margins of American culture where the poet grew up, in a Franco-American family in northern Maine. “How do I / close that household we keep inside my brain?” (60) asks the bereaved speaker of “Grandfather.” The household Voisine evokes here is that of childhood, ancestry, and origins, where we often find ourselves inside our brains, even when we think we have moved to somewhere else entirely.

These poems are populated by images of the poverty and rugged natural beauty of northern New England: children undressing by a wood stove, stars on a clear winter night, boiled potatoes with sugar, calloused hands, and government cheese. They are haunted, spoken in the voice of someone who has left a place and looks back at it from a distance that is unbridgeable. “My memories are the kind janitors / sweep up from cutting room floors, scraps,” begins “What Was So Beautiful About the Father,” “the before and after, but not the moment itself” (31). This long poem at the center of the book catalogues the injuries suffered by a parent who supports his family through logging and other physical labor. It alternates between verse and prose, as if searching for a form capable of capturing things as they really were. Narrative passages about the father’s life and injuries are contrasted with more lyrical ones that depict him from his child’s point of view:

In my small scrap of world, my father is  
fragile as those bubbles and cannot withstand  
fate and evil, equivalents.  
Being poor is my father.

A Russian doll series, the largest  
is this Evil, and it encloses the doll of Poor.  
My father is the next doll, he  
disappears into Poor while completely containing  
me. I am lucky, the smallest doll  
whose features are plain, barely articulated  
by the brush, the one whose body won't  
open. Who can't bear that she is the reason  
the others' sturdy, wood torsos have split. (36-37)

This wounded and fragile father is Christlike, but in his remoteness rather than his virtue. He is contrasted with a middle-class father on television, “mowing the lawn, polishing his car, whatever luxurious task — I had no real idea what that kind of father would do on a Saturday” (39). It is the child's responsibility to protect him from his own sense of failure, his awareness that “he was not providing well” (39). The pains of poverty are drawn with exacting specificity here, and Voisine articulates the knowledge accumulated by living amid deprivation:

Many people know you can live, and even work off and on, with a broken back.  
Many know what it means to a family when its spine has been broken.  
Many know the exhaustion of public assistance.  
How fear can pretend it is pride.  
How deeply unreasonable the notion of an omnipotent god seems at these times.  
(34-35)

“Many” here gestures toward a gap in knowledge between some readers and others, softly indicating a breach between a knowing “us” and an uninitiated “them.” A question about empathy hovers here, about what the speaker can communicate and what the reader can understand, between what is lived and what can be told. Lived experience is similarly untranslatable in the poem, “In English,” where the speaker struggles to render in English memories that exist in another tongue:

*Did you speak English then?*

No.

*When did you learn how?*

I didn't *learn* anything. As a child I  
felt things  
in my body.

The shock came later, from the brain,  
the naming. (16)

Queries such as “*What is it?*” and “*How is it wounded?*” are answered with “I don’t know in English” (16-17). Memories are fragmented and shape-shifting. From her position in the present, the speaker cannot answer the question “*What exactly happened?*” with any certainty (17). The original “language” of these experiences was that of the body, and it cannot be translated into some other form of knowing.



The relationship between embodied experience and subjectivity occupies Voisine’s other two poetry collections: her 2008 book, *Rare High Meadow of Which I Might Dream*, and her recent chapbook, *And God Created Women*. Neither is set in a particular geographic location, but in both the female body is a place from which the poet observes the world and through which experience is filtered.

*Rare High Meadow of Which I Might Dream* appeared several years after *Cathedral of the North*, and it feels like a calculated departure from that earlier outing, as though a young Voisine is purposefully experimenting with new forms and themes. Many of the poems are more formally inventive, with longer, fuller lines, sometimes scattered across the page rather than gathered into stanzas. No longer oriented toward the past, the female speakers of these poems are rootless, engaging with literature, ideas, and places that are excitingly, and sometimes dangerously, unfamiliar. The poems’ broad outward reach suggests selves struggling for purchase in a too-wide world, veering between freedom and flotsam, constructing their identities through a process of elimination. “First Taste” recounts in second-person a young woman’s first years of independence in New York City:

...You are beginning to learn you had a different  
kind of childhood, and the shock is only starting to sink in  
  
so you see suffering everywhere. People  
you don’t even know tell you their troubles; each woman  
at your school has her own well of sorrow. One has a child  
  
who will eat \$200 of groceries a night so she can throw it up.  
One has breast cancer, another has a severely disabled  
adult child. The subway is a study hall of suffering.  
  
You watch and intuit, read faces, bodies with your high-  
powered lens of pain. [...] (28-29)

The young speaker projects herself into the people she observes through her “lens of pain.” She is “bingeing on feeling,” but also searching for a “we,” discovering that the suffering of others is



both the same as and different from her own. Over time her skin thickens somewhat to loneliness, grief, and suffering (“You stop worrying / so much about where the homeless can sleep” [33]), but the pain of others remains a kind of touchstone. Her daily, urban encounters with strangers and the mostly short-lived friendships she makes serve to shape and narrow down her sense of self. In the final section of the poem, set years later, the speaker finds photographs she took “of people without asking,” of “shadows, piles of sticks, graffiti,” and is surprised:

...Now you wonder,  
*what are these images of?* These photographs, once perfect expressions  
seem boring. Your physical distance from your living  
subjects indicated how scared you were, that’s what they document,  
when you now wish for an image of the kids at school,  
naptime, or the igloo city you helped them build  
after a snowstorm trapped you all at school. That distance you stood  
in your photographs in inverse proportion to the power  
this world had to wreck you... (35-36)

The stanza break between “living” and “subjects” is particularly powerful, suggesting that the distance between the observer and the observed is no less great than that between the observer and her own lived experience. The photos, intended to document the world around her, instead capture her separation from and vulnerability to it.

Such vulnerability is a prominent feature of life in a female body. “Dangerous for Girls” describes how the potential for violence stalks young women:

...there were many anonymous girls that summer,  
there always are, who lower their necks to the stone  
and pray, not to God but to the Virgin, herself once  
a young girl, chosen in her room by an archangel.  
Instead of praying that summer I watched television, reruns of  
a UFO series featuring a melancholic woman detective  
who had gotten cancer and was made sterile by aliens. I watched  
infomercials: exercise machines, pasta makers,  
and a product called Nails Again With Henna,  
*ladies, make your nails steely strong, naturally,*  
and then the photograph of Chandra Levy  
would appear again, below a bright red number  
such as 81, to indicate the days she was missing. (19-20)

Voisine's ability to leap so adeptly — from the internal world, to Christian imagery, to science fiction, infomercials, and the nightly news — gives the collection an omnivorous, searching, and youthful energy. She seems to be mapping the process by which lived, embodied experience — riding the subway, praying, watching television — accumulates into knowledge, an embodied understanding of life's stakes.

Those stakes are palpable ten years later, in her 2018 chapbook, *And God Created Women*, which contains thirteen poems written from within the contested territory of the female body. These poems are more playful than much of Voisine's work; the youthful searching energy is burned away, leaving behind a seasoned depth of vision. Short lines without stanza breaks give many of them a breathless, urgent quality. In her version of the creation story, God gives Eve "some great hair, / full of body and a lovely reddish-blond," and "great tits— / large and ebullient" (15), but Eve's less well-endowed progeny sneak Cheetohs under a stairwell. "Shameful" begins with an apology for having "fucked up / your day by my body in / those old pink sweatpants / that don't fit and are stained / from a cooking accident" (4). The speaker's frumpy middle-aged body may be a kind of transgression, but she soon admits, "I am only ashamed / in some distant, uninvolved way" (4), and concludes the poem with an invitation to hold hands on public transport, with its cast of sympathetic characters:

beside the woman who smelled  
different from any of my people,  
the man who said mother-  
fucker many times in various  
places in one long sentence  
into a phone beside a strollered  
and beribboned baby (pierced ears)  
who twitched in her guileless  
sleep, and then if you could say  
*I am hateful and despairing,*  
I'd console, *we all are too.* (5)

Again here, a "we" appears, to shift the individual out of a mode of body-related shame and into one of communion ("we all are"), which the judgmental "you" is invited to join.

In "Self-Portrait as Medic," "Self-Portrait as Sphinx," and "Self-Portrait as Cop," Voisine employs *dramatis personae* to imagine other points of view, other poetic dictions. Her "cold-blooded" cop swaggers around a crime scene, trying "to be someone who fixes things, people" (30). Her Sphinx speaks in riddles, and her medic admits to her charges, "I love // your wounds more than my own" (8). These characters have a freedom that most of the other poems' speakers cannot enjoy. The position of the female body is one in which even acts of generosity and empathy imply risk. In "Neighborhood," a woman opens her front door expecting a friend

but finds there an angry young stranger, “thin and sewed with ink, shapes / askew up his neck” (21). The threat is implied but obvious: the woman and her baby alone in the apartment, the angry stranger at the open door. The poem chronicles a few seconds of terrified thought, the memories and fears that might occur to you in “the moments / of belief, trust / when you open / your face / to a stranger” (18), moments filled with terrible vulnerability.

In a 2016 interview, Voisine acknowledged a shift in her thinking about “place” in her work. “I keep thinking about my speaker’s location in her body as more important than anything else,” she said, “which seems a significant change from my usual practice. The environment of the female body, as I approach my middle ages, is THE formative experience from which I write.”

For the reader, however, this “significant change” feels more like a pivot. In one passage of *The Bower*, the speaker and her daughter duck out of a museum exhibit early:

On the way out, a woman in a photo, strange dress and shoes,  
watches workers on break. I study her empty buckets  
and wonder about her days, tasks, pains. What did she bring?  
Some kind of lunch for her workers? Water? A boy  
shirtless and shoeless is about the toss a stone at a horse.  
Today, I am the boy... (38)

Projecting herself into the picture, the speaker projects herself into the bodies of the woman with her buckets, the boy about to throw a stone. This effort is repeated throughout the book, with the child, the husband, the taxi driver, the homeless man, the next-door neighbor, the police officer, the veteran, as the speaker struggles to understand what drives regular, reasonable people to hatred and violence.

Susan Sontag warned that, “No ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain” (8), and Voisine’s art seems to reside inside that warning: How can “we,” rather than be taken for granted, instead be described, felt, or experienced? How do I know when I belong? How is belonging known or felt? Where is the border between self and other? What are the limits of our ability to identify and empathize with one another? Can I know what is it like to live in your body? *The Bower* is presumably a book primarily about place, but like much of Voisine’s work, it asks fundamental questions about empathy, which are also questions about embodiment.



There are several threads that weave through Connie Voisine's oeuvre: a bracing sensitivity to socio-economic class; an awareness of political and sectarian borders; a symbolic vocabulary clearly influenced by Catholicism; and a peripatetic quality, perhaps the influence of her own wide travels. But moments of encounter, where one opens one's face to a stranger, are perhaps her work's most notable refrain and the one with the greatest relevance to our current historical moment.

Perhaps empathy is just hatred's other, braver, face. Both are responses to the pain and shock of vulnerability. Empathy is easy before we fully understand just how fundamentally we can damage one another. The child's presence in *The Bower* illustrates this. She is the "before" picture, capturing butterflies in her gentle hands the summer before her trip to Belfast, where she will see literal blood in the streets. The "after" picture is everyone else, those whom the family encounters in Northern Ireland, as well as the child's mother, who despite her remove from that particular conflict, understands sectarian passion well enough.

At one point, later in *The Bower*, late-night internet surfing brings the protagonist to an article about her own home town "in a remote wooded state." The article's Black author is offended by the ignorance of locals who ask to touch her daughter's hair and "can't imagine / what it's like to live in houses that are so cheap, the houses in which I [Voisine's speaker] grew up." The speaker reels, "I am pierced—is this shame, anger, both? I mumble all / the rest of the day about houses, what makes them cheap" (47). Empathy drains away in the rising tide of her bitterness toward the unknown author:

Not hard to see how even strangers could become so fiercely  
and not at all abstractedly estranged, harder to imagine speaking  
across years, birth, and fear. Batten, button, zip right up. Meanwhile,  
here in the paper, an anniversary: "We in the Easter Rising Committee  
would like to make it clear that we are unrepentant Irish republicans  
who uphold the right of those who took on the might  
of the British Empire to do so by force of arms. We make  
no apologies for that. We will not be inviting unionist, loyalists  
or any manifestation of the British state to our commemorations."  
The unionists had already turned the invitation down. (48)

The speaker's affront and her impulse to "batten, button, zip right up" in self-protection, is juxtaposed with the stubborn, sprawling legacy of sectarian hatred in Northern Ireland. This recalls the moment from *Calle Florista*, discussed earlier, where the mindset of the individual contemporary traveler subtly echoes that of the colonial settler. This echo is a call to attention, a

reminder that violent histories are made up of individual grievances and the choices that grow out of them. All of us, if we are honest, can relate to hatred; we all have the instinct for it. Voisine shows how easily we slide into it.

Voisine has said that she comes from “an insular, very specific culture.” It is tempting to conjecture that her background, along the remote border between the U.S. and Canada in northern Maine, informs her interest in borderlands and her awareness that divisions between “us” and “them” can be both provisional and as unanswerable as gospel. Those origins certainly seem to temper her sense of entitlement about the people and places she depicts in her work. Her desire to make visible her own position within her narratives, to complicate acts of seeing and telling and knowing what the truth is, is a refreshing interrogation of confessional poetry itself. In her poems, the benevolence, innocence, or omnipotence of the poetic speaker is never assured. Voisine maintains a penchant for self-revelation, while also practicing careful skepticism toward her own subjectivity. If her readers pity her (as she hopes in *The Bower* that they may), it is because her blindnesses and biases as our storyteller are made plain. At times, we feel we might belong to some collective that, by a poetic slight-of-hand, she creates through her self-revelation — the “we” that exists between the poet and her reader.

Voisine’s having left a specific, regional culture and lived outside of it for a long time may account for the sense of displacement, longing, and ambivalence in many of these poems. But there is also a sense of celebration and adventure here that is very much located in the experience in female liberation. Women’s fairly recent freedom to cross the border of the front doorstep and face the risks and vulnerabilities that lay beyond, makes Voisine’s work feel gently new. “*Where am I?*” the speaker of “This is for the silver of highway” asks repeatedly. This poem is an ode to the open road, or perhaps more specifically to the vulnerable territory that lies in the borderland between here and there. It ends with a sort of toast:

...Here’s to  
not where I’m coming from and not where I’m going.  
Here’s to gypsy movement (as my grandmother  
calls it), the infinity of living between. (57)

This, the closing poem of *Rare High Meadow of Which I Might Dream*, was published in 2008. More than a decade later, the question, *Where am I?*, still animates Connie Voisine’s poetry. She occupies a fertile, liminal poetic space, between lyric and narrative, both inside and outside of the scenes and images she creates. The ability to tolerate the discomfort of such infinite in-between places is an enviable skill in our troubled times.

-Abby Paige

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2020

## Review: Malden by David Surette

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### Recommended Citation

Theriault, Jeri (2020) "Review: Malden by David Surette," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/16>

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**REVIEW: Surette, David. *Malden*. Westbrook, ME: Moon Pie Press, 2018. 86 pages, paper, \$15.00. ISBN: 9780998192284.**

David Surette's *Malden* is an album full of snapshots from a youth spent in Malden, Massachusetts. The album's cover aptly portrays a young and grinning hockey player, Surette himself, number 8 on the Malden hockey team. The eight hockey poems provide a framework for the collection's exploration of growing up in a working-class neighborhood.

Uncle Eddie, "a sensation at Malden High in those days / before Bobby Orr," inspired the young Surette to try the sport ("We Called My Father's Friends Uncle"). Even in the off-season the speaker and his friends play street hockey as the "Old Men" push lawn mowers or chase the boys away from the fronts of their houses. Surette creates the sounds of the boys' play ("thwack of our sticks / and shouts of *Shoot! I'm open!*") and the old men on the porch listening to "the soundtrack of our lives," the Red Sox game.

"Hockey" suggests the sport is something much larger than sliding "that puck / under the prone goalie." It becomes "a promise life can't take back." Often a part of the French-Canadian experience in New England mill towns, hockey demands toughness, as suggested when the narrator's brother gets stitched up between periods with "no anesthesia, no complaints / except *Hurry, I don't want to miss the whole period.*" The sport makes demands of parents too: "my dad watching warm-ups, checking the goalie's / weaknesses, my mother wishing we played a gentler game."

Surette's clipped diction sometimes mimics a sportswriter's as when he describes a teammate's slap shot, "hard and low / an inch inside the post" ("Dom the Bomb"). Such straightforward sentence structure and word choice also support the rich evocations of his working-class neighborhood. After the wrecking ball demolishes "The Old Red Brick Church," the narrator reveals his emotional connection to this childhood landmark; he wants to steal one of the "blood red bricks." Sister Maureen, his teacher ("The Immaculate Conception Grammar School") leaves a lasting impression as "just another girl in my class / innocent as anyone of them." Those "blood red bricks" and "just another girl in my class" are small epiphanies made all the more powerful by the plain-spoken diction.

In a similar way, the poet offers a succinct portrait of his father in "Our Basement." An inventory of the tools, books and old records, the fossils "of his life before he was my father" is rendered crisply by mostly one-syllable words in short declarative sentences. The description of the well-ordered workbench culminates in the man himself, the speaker's father, whose own curt words are neatly delivered as an aphorism:

Rows of jars, their covers nailed to boards



they hang handy: nuts, bolts, and screws.  
On the shelves sit saws, planes, and bits,  
*The right tool for the right job.*

Other depictions of people and places flesh out this neighborhood: a brother who dares the narrator to walk to the edge of the third floor roof (“Daredevil”); Sal, the barber who looks like Vic Morrow (“Covering the Spread”); and a grandfather who stares down bullies (“The Great Depression”). As he has done in earlier writings, Surette chooses his diction and sentence structure throughout *Malden* to enhance the subject of these poems. Indeed, the cadence of his crisp monosyllables evokes the young skater’s blades cutting up the ice from one end of an early morning arena to the other.

-Jeri Theriault

2020

## Review: Walking into Lightning by Ellen LaFlèche

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### Recommended Citation

Riel, Steven (2020) "Review: Walking into Lightning by Ellen LaFlèche," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 17.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/17>

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**REVIEW: LaFlèche, Ellen. *Walking into Lightning*. Hilo, Hawai'i: Saddle Road Press, 2019. 67 p., paper. ISBN: 9781732952126.**

In Ellen LaFlèche's first full-length book of poems, *Walking into Lightning*, the poet carefully constructs a consistently unified verbal expression that invites the reader to experience the depth of a significant loss. LaFlèche tracks her own experience of partnering with her husband, John Clobridge, as he confronts the implications of his ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) diagnosis, supporting him as he approaches death, and finally wrestling with her own ensuing grief. LaFlèche allows us, remarkably, to observe the intimacy experienced between these two spouses, to witness what they shared without breaching what should remain private. The imaginative inventiveness that LaFlèche unflinchingly brings to each individual step in the journey is one of the major reasons this book is so strong. Her surprising and engaging textures help her to avoid sentimentality, which is quite an achievement considering the tragic circumstances she so artfully describes.

Given the subject matter, it is fitting that LaFlèche's dominant rhetorical device is anaphora: the repetition of the same word or words at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, sentences, or lines. Many of us have encountered this technique in the verse of Western religions, where it traditionally figured as a means of invoking or grasping for the sacred. LaFlèche titles several of her poems as prayers, blessings, lamentations, and credos. Sometimes the repetitions she employs are irregular and varied; at other times, they are rhythmic and insistent:

Because the moon is grimacing like a mouth in rigor, because  
a hunchbacked man is pruning his rose garden, because  
once a lover slickened that hump with patchouli oil, because  
the kissable beauty of an angelfish mouth.  
("Prayer for Weeping")

The risk of repetition—its possibility for dullness—is a serious one, but LaFlèche adeptly sidesteps this danger by enlivening a predictable formal framework, packing it with unexpected contents. The excerpt above provides a typical example: how many of us have ever seen a mouth in rigor mortis, never mind compared that image to the moon? That line forces us to stop and imagine how profoundly grief can transform one's experience of the world, so that even the moon is never seen as it was prior to attending to a loved one at his or her deathbed.

The four lines quoted above also demonstrate one of the primary ways in which LaFlèche creates a unified experience—a subtly self-referencing echo chamber—out of the entire set of poems that make up this book. Her evocation of the physical relationship her husband and she shared—both as lovers, and as ill person and caretaker—expands beyond the

poems that specifically address that relationship, so that a description of the lover of a humpbacked man spreading oil on his back, or of an angelfish's "kissable mouth," echoes and expands the book's core relationship. Words used to describe the couple's lovemaking ("nape" and "wrist") reoccur throughout the book, fashioning a net of imagistic and sonic consistency that reminds the reader of the relationship that was lost.

The roughly chronological sequencing of the poems in this book—mapping John Clobridge's diagnosis, increasingly severe illness, death, and what follows for his grieving spouse—enhances its impact. This narrative structure allows us to witness first the excruciating honesty between husband and wife as they prepare for what's coming:

I hear you rasp:  
*Don't tranquilize me when I start to thrash.*  
(*"I Refuse to Read the Death with Dignity Brochure"*)

That honesty reverberates with the capacity for truth-telling that we later encounter when the surviving wife examines beliefs that no longer remain unchallenged:

I believe hearts never break,  
but when they do  
they crack into shards like a biblical vessel in the shape of a woman.  
...

I believe spirits cannot be broken,  
but when they break  
the sun is a blind spot on the sky's tender retina.  
That sudden nightfall.  
(*"Credo for Things that Crack and Break"*)

And it is only *after* having been allowed to experience as readers the depth of the love between the poet and her deceased husband that we can begin to appreciate what it means for her to entertain in "Blindfold" the possibility of finding, as a white-haired woman, a similarly aged "new beloved":

Let my lover's white hair taste like milk and thunder in my mouth.  
Let our limbs move in the slow spirals of synchronized swimmers  
and my long white hair  
fall like a blindfold over my new lover's eyes.

Dying might be like that.

While she continues to live, nothing (and certainly nothing involving romance) can happen to her that doesn't refer in some way to the husband she has lost.

*Walking into Lightning* is not a book that can be easily forgotten. In poems like "Prayer for Despair," LaFlèche's metaphoric evocation of the horrors of ALS becomes vividly etched in

our minds: “Because the sun is slicing the horizon’s spine like a circular saw[.]” The lasting impression of such poems is intensified when they refer not just to the ferocious destruction of one individual’s nervous system but to the broader illness of our environment: “because / double-headed trout are swimming through irradiated water[.]” By deftly plumbing the complex depths—including despair—of what it means to witness a beloved life-partner fail and eventually pass away, what Ellen LaFlèche achieves in this memorable book places her among the most accomplished Franco-American poets.

-Steven Riel

2020

## Review: The Haunted Life

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### Recommended Citation

Greenham, David (2020) "Review: The Haunted Life," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 18.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/18>

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**REVIEW: *The Haunted Life*. By Sean Daniels, based on the book by Jack Kerouac, directed by Sean Daniels and christopher oscar peña, Merrimack Repertory Theater, April 2019, Lowell, Massachusetts.**

“Peter Martin, is an average American youth in an average and beautiful American town” are the first words spoken by the leading character in Sean Daniels’ adaptation of Jack Kerouac’s *The Haunted Life*, which had its world premiere at Merrimack Repertory Theater in March 2019. Peter Martin (played wonderfully by Raviv Ullman) is talking about the fictional community of Galloway, Massachusetts. But if you know the recently rediscovered short novel, Peter Martin is really Jack Kerouac, and the average and beautiful town is his beloved Lowell, Massachusetts.

Merrimack Repertory Theater in Lowell is one of the few regional theater companies where the season schedule regularly includes plays that honor and celebrate the local community. Kerouac, as you may know, is a native son. Each fall the city celebrates the great Franco Beat poet who changed the landscape of American literature. His most famous works, *The Dharma Bums* and *On The Road*, continue to represent the longing of being young in America.

Lesser known is this early work – his second, *The Haunted Life*, which, although unfinished, was written in 1944. It was rediscovered in 2014, and former MRT artistic director Sean Daniels persuaded the Kerouac estate to allow him to create a script based on the novel.

Lowell’s Franco history began in the early and mid-1840s with the arrival of a blacksmith, several carpenters, and Catholic clergy (Le Comité franco-américain de Lowell). Some came from Québec while others passed through some of the small communities that dotted the Adirondack Region of New York. Their journey was just the beginning of the same kind of post-Civil War migration that later occurred in states like Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Rhode Island. Lowell became one of the centers of the Industrial Revolution, and textile mills, carpet factories, and machine shops desperately sought workers. Their agents traveled throughout Québec in search of workers, and many families sent their teen-age children south.

Kerouac’s parents Léo-Alcide Kéroack and Gabrielle-Ange Lévesque were both born in Québec, and met and married in Nashua, New Hampshire prior to moving to Lowell.

The influence of his parents is evident in the story of the fictional Jack, Peter Martin. His father Joe (gruffly played by Joel Colodner), the working owner of a local printing press, embodied the spirit of the father who’d worked since he was a boy to build a life in a new country. His mother, Vivienne Martin (a gentle Tina Fabrique), was loving and caring. Peter

wants to be a writer. But in 1941, just as the effects of the Great Depression are giving way to industry and prosperity, the demographics are changing.

“America isn’t the same country anymore; it isn’t even America. It’s become a goddamn pest hole for every crummy race from the other side,” Joe Martin complains. “Every scummy race in the world, Jews, Greeks, Armenians, Syrians, they’ve all come here, and they’re still coming, and they’ll keep on coming by the boatload. Mark my word, you’ll see the day when a real American won’t have a chance to work and live decently in his own country, a day when ruin and bankruptcy will fall on this nation because all these damned foreigners will have taken everything over and made a holy mess of it.”

The script perfectly sets a tone that reflects the period, while at the same time allowing us room to examine our own attitudes.

Peter speaks, hopefully, for us: “Come on Pop, they’re not just ‘those foreigners’ they’re my friends. I know those people.” In fact, Peter’s best friend is one of those foreigners, an Armenian refugee named Garabed (earnestly played by Vichet Chum). Garabed is the perfect foil to Joe’s rants. He’s thoughtful, unassuming, and looking to find his place in the new world.

If Peter’s parents and best friend represent both sides of his present, Peter’s future rests in the unabashed wisdom of his classmate, neighbor, and love interest, Eleanor (embodied with great energy by Caroline Neff). An early morning encounter after Peter’s been out drinking all night is indicative of Caroline’s tough love: “You want to be a poet? Write poetry, don’t stumble about on a morning drunk talking about poetry. That’s not being a writer, that’s being a drunken talker, and a morning drunk at that. You give me the shivers. You’re better than that.”

But as we know, World War Two intruded and eventually affected nearly everyone in nearly every country. Peter and his friends were not left unscathed. Peter joins the Merchant Marines (as Kerouac did) and loses friends and family.

*The Haunted Life* beautifully captures that moment where life goes from a wild and somewhat carefree adventure to a journey filled with as many challenges as joys; it’s a story that follows fictional Peter Martin as he slowly becomes the equal to *On The Road’s* fictional Sal Paradise or *Dharma Bums’* fictional Raymond Smith. As *The Haunted Life’s* Peter Martin concludes: “Perhaps I cannot conquer the world, but I can record the stories of those who have made me who I am. Simple stories. Small stories. True stories. The people I love, and even when I didn’t love them, loved me. I will make sure they are remembered.”

The stories of the immigrant mill workers and laborers like those from Kerouac’s native Lowell are not often heard. They worked too hard to write, and yet, they are the ones who made our communities. Their stories need to continue to be discovered and shared.



While in America we squander our time with arguments and finger pointing, it's important to remember that we are a nation of immigrants. Our best understanding of our country, of Maine as it enters its bicentennial year, and of what makes these places great, holds together the sacrifices of the native peoples who cherished and nourished the land along with the industry of immigrants who later arrived with their own aspirations. To forget that is to ignore the real history of gifted writers like Kerouac, and to stifle generations of new writers who have yet to put a single word on the page.

-David Greenham

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2020

## **Review Essay: Songs Upon the Rivers: The Buried History of the French-Speaking Canadiens and Métis from the Great Lakes and the Mississippi across to the Pacific by Robert Foxcurran, with Michel Bouchard and Sébastien Malette**

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### **Recommended Citation**

Vermette, David (2020) "Review Essay: Songs Upon the Rivers: The Buried History of the French-Speaking Canadiens and Métis from the Great Lakes and the Mississippi across to the Pacific by Robert Foxcurran, with Michel Bouchard and Sébastien Malette," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/19>

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**Review Essay: Foxcurran, Robert, with Michel Bouchard and Sébastien Malette. *Songs Upon the Rivers: The Buried History of the French-Speaking Canadiens and Métis from the Great Lakes and the Mississippi across to the Pacific*. Montreal: Baraka Books, 2016. 448 pages, paper, \$34.95. ISBN: 9781771860819**

*Americans who study but one history—their own—do not know enough of the services rendered to their country by Canadians. In fact, nearly all the large cities of the Western States have been established by Canadians. Consult the historical societies of Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, and you will learn to respect and admire the French Canadian element.*

*From Langlade, the father of Wisconsin; Juneau, the founder of Milwaukee; Joseph Robidon, the founder of St. Joe Mission; Vital Guerin, the founder of St. Paul, Minn.; Menard, first lieutenant governor of Illinois; to Jean Louis Légaré, the trader, who has persuaded Sitting Bull to surrender to the United States authorities—the list is long of the Canadians who have rendered famous the name of our national element.*  
-- Ferdinand Gagnon, October 1881<sup>1</sup>

The march of English-speaking settlers from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific is still the dominant narrative in the history of the western United States. Foxcurran, Bouchard, and Malette, the trio of authors of *Songs Upon The Rivers*, present an alternate history of this storied region. Theirs is the history of the French-speaking communities that spanned the vast country from the Great Lakes to the Pacific Northwest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this epoch, the authors show, francophone peoples in North America established a subculture tied to the fur trade, in a milieu formed by a *métissage* between French-Canadian and indigenous peoples. A network spread along the waterways of North America from east to west appearing, here and there, across a large portion of the continent. French was the lingua franca of what became the US Midwest and it remained so into the nineteenth century. Decade by decade, as the US expanded westward, it absorbed and slowly anglicized the region.

Foxcurran, Bouchard, and Malette show that the fur trade served as an unwitting advance-guard for later North American colonial projects. They argue that the *Canadiens* working beside people who were of mixed “French-Indian” heritage (to use a term employed in the US), continued to be the most significant agents in this trade, even as it came to be controlled by British and American managers. The authors also imply the existence of a self-conscious *Canadien* identity, both French-speaking and Catholic, untethered from France by the end of the eighteenth century. The notion of *métissage*—which translates literally in English as “mixing,” or “miscegenation,” but which has taken on its own meaning across linguistic

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<sup>1</sup> From the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor’s *Thirteenth Annual Report* (Boston, 1882), 22f.

boundaries—was bound up with this identity, especially in the eyes of the *Canadiens'* anglophone neighbors.

The companies that dominated the fur trade by the early nineteenth century—the Hudson Bay Company, the Northwesters, and John Jacob Astor's enterprises—were not engaged in settler agriculture on any meaningful scale. In fact, the Hudson Bay Company discouraged settlement in the West. However, some of their ex-employees did settle in places such as French Prairie, Oregon, where *Canadien* men married women from among the local tribes (my ancestor's brother Hyacinthe Lavigueur was one of them). This period would see French-speaking factors in the fur trade eventually pushed aside, as the fur trade waned, while land was seized from indigenous peoples, who were dispossessed or deported.

One of the most striking portions of the book describes how indigenous peoples were removed from the Great Lakes region. The authors recount, step-by-step, how these nations were dispossessed by the US government: which treaties were signed and when; how the federal government unilaterally altered the terms of these treaties; and the mechanisms by which governments used land tenure systems to seize territory. It is an object lesson in the tactics of settler colonialism. The Andrew Jackson Administration, and later Jacksonians, are implicated most heavily in these crimes of fraud, corruption, and violence.

The authors go on to point out that in the US of the early twentieth century, race categorizers refused to recognize “mixed-race” people they called “French-Indians” as a distinct identity, tending to force them into other categories (357, 378). In this period, when eugenics theories were in vogue, US racial taxonomists had categories like “mulatto” to describe some “mixed-race” people. But it better served institutionalized racism in the case of the “French-Indians” to make a hard distinction between one “race” and another, meaning that people tended to be classified officially as either “white” or as “Indian.” For US authorities, the “French-Indians” were a Canadian phenomenon; it became dangerous to identify as Métis or *Bois-brûlé* in the US in situations where officialdom tended to recognize only binary racial categories. The risks of doing so included deportation (378).

*Songs* points out that, still later, US collective memory papered over the *Canadien* and “French-Indian” era of the West, lionizing anglophone Western heroes like Jim Bridger and Kit Carson who were more appropriate to the ideology of Manifest Destiny. A new narrative, dominant in twentieth-century US popular culture, depicted hardy Anglo-Protestant settlers who entered a supposedly empty quarter where no “white man” had walked, and “tamed” a “wild west.” In reality, descendants of the French and Spanish, as well as of the British and the

Russians, populated strategic locations throughout the North American West, preceding or paralleling the US drive to the Pacific.

Since the authors claim to present a “buried” history, they frequently turn to forgotten accounts by nineteenth-century eyewitnesses. They mine, for example, the travel memoirs of fur traders and military men, and little-known writings of contemporary European observers, including de Tocqueville, to discover the *Canadien* and “French-Indian” substrate beneath the received anglo-centric historical narrative.

The book has its flaws. An occasionally meandering style circumscribes various points rather than just getting to them. The structure of the book is sometimes opaque, too, moving back and forth between one time period and another. It would have been clearer to proceed chronologically, starting with events in the fur trade in the East, and then proceeding westward to the Great Lakes, Upper Louisiana, and the Northwest. While the book’s numerous period graphics are fascinating, more straightforward and contemporary maps of the territories under discussion would have helped readers navigate the territories the authors discuss.

Though the structural shortcomings in the book are most likely due to authorship by committee, the trio of authors succeed in finding a unified voice. Knowing that one of the authors has a background in anthropology and another in law, it is an even greater surprise that the book is largely jargon-free.



There is no avoiding that at least one of these authors has been embroiled in recent Canadian controversies over the definition of the term “Métis” and the contention, advocated in this book and elsewhere, that this term is applicable to people in eastern Canada as well as in the Prairie West. The alleged hazard arises when people who may have had an indigenous ancestor many generations ago—as far back as the seventeenth century—claim a Métis identity even if their ancestors had been white-identified for generations. Some observers claim that the number of self-identified Métis has increased dramatically in recent years, but the numbers are hotly disputed.<sup>2</sup> They argue that such claims to Métis identity are opportunistic. The Canadian Constitution of 1982 defines the Métis as indigenous people, and critics claim that allegedly faux-Métis are asserting rights and privileges attached to being an indigenous North American under Canadian law. In this argument, the claims of eastern Métis are said to be a theft of

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<sup>2</sup> Darryl R. J. Leroux and Adam Gaudry, “Becoming Indigenous: The Rise of Eastern Métis in Canada,” *The Conversation*, October 25, 2017 (<http://theconversation.com/becoming-indigenous-the-rise-of-eastern-metis-in-canada-80794>).

identity, which is grounded in the historic experience of the Prairie West and tied to that geographic region. This view emphasizes that “Métis” does not designate any person with mixed ancestry, but a member of a nation with a specific historical and territorial nexus.<sup>3</sup>

This controversy touches upon delicate questions of cultural and tribal identity, as well as issues in Canadian constitutional law, beyond the ken of this reviewer. But this controversy is central to *Songs* and its interdisciplinary team of authors. The evidence they present shows that terms such as *métis*, *métif*, *bois-brûlé*, “half-breed” and “French-Indian” were in use on the continent by different people to describe individuals before any of them were used to identify a specific group, namely the historic Métis nation in the Prairies.

But were such terms ethnonyms, or merely descriptors for an individual? The authors cite fur-company clerk Gabriel Franchère who, in the early nineteenth century, described a certain François Landry as “*un métif*.” Was this designating him as a member of a nationality or culture, or is it a descriptor intended to indicate something about Landry as an individual? As the authors acknowledge, in the case of Landry, the term “*métif*” indicated “a person of mixed ancestry (or heritage).” Such cases raise the question of how a signifier of race or heritage came to designate a nation.

In this book, the authors have not yet made a case for a more expansive definition of Métis sufficient to silence their opponents, although they have laid important, intellectual groundwork. They suggest that there was a *Canadien* and “French-Indian” fur-trade culture that seeded itself throughout the continent, having perhaps its largest harvest along the Red River, but present elsewhere in different forms. They argue that those who have preserved a culture tied to the trans-continental phenomenon of the fur trade may lay claim to the term *Métis*, no matter where in North America they reside. Two of the authors have inaugurated other ambitious publishing projects which they claim will make their case definitively. May the evidence they present be judged on its merits.

However, an outside perspective might perceive more than one irony in this controversy. As this trio of authors supports, the belief that *Canadiens* were “mixed-race” was quite common in the US, especially in New England, dating back at least to the eighteenth century; New Englanders tended to view *Canadiens* as “half Savage” (108). In the eyes of many English-speaking observers, the category “*Canadien*” or “French-Canadian” contained the notion of *mixedness*, of *métissage* (194-95, 244). One of the pretexts used to “other” the French-Canadian immigrants to the northeastern US in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the

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<sup>3</sup> For this debate see Leroux and Gaudry and also Leroux’s website <http://www.raceshifting.com/>.

belief that they were “half-breeds.” Eugenics proponents, with great influence in legislatures and in academia, viewed the *Canadiens* in New England as an inferior people in part because they were said to have a large admixture of that mythical stuff: Indian blood (Vermette, 250-256).

One such proponent, arch-eugenicist Madison Grant, reinforces binary racial categories, classifying as “Indians” all people whose ancestors included both European and indigenous North American “blood.” In his *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916, rev. ed. 1921) Grant wrote, “In the Catholic colonies...of New France and New Spain, if the half-breed were a good Catholic he was regarded as a Frenchman or a Spaniard, as the case might be. This fact alone gives the clew [sic] to many of our Colonial wars where the Indians, other than the Iroquois, were persuaded to join the French against the Americans by *half-breeds who considered themselves Frenchmen*” (85).<sup>4</sup> However, for eugenic purposes, wrote Grant, “The cross between a white man and an Indian is an Indian” (Spiro, 152).

Repeated and vehement denials of a *métissage* between *Canadiens* and indigenous North Americans, from those of the ultra “race” conscious Dillingham Immigration Commission in the US, to Québec’s Canon Lionel Groulx, suggest that this belief—true or false—was widespread and persistent in the US in the first half of the twentieth century. Once denigrated by bigoted white Anglo-Saxon Protestants as “half-breeds,” the French-Canadian descendant today who points to a distant First Nations ancestor launches into the turbulent waters of current controversies around race and identity.

A further irony is that, to the outsider, both parties in these ongoing debates over the definition of “Métis” appear to be motivated by genuine concern for the welfare of indigenous peoples. They disagree on semantics and on matters of historical fact. For the latter, one can only turn to the evidence.



Our current political moment seems to demand sharp, binary distinctions, and in North America today, “race” trumps all others. Glaring, systemic racial injustices continent-wide have produced this result. But in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, language and religion also created sharp cultural and social fault lines. In the late nineteenth century, solidarity among French-speaking, North American Catholics crossed some boundaries of perceived race. The Franco-American Catholics in New England who petitioned the US Secretary of State to intervene on behalf of Métis leader Louis Riel, before his execution, felt that Riel’s people in the

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<sup>4</sup> Emphasis added.

Northwest were kin, part of a greater French North American whole (*French North America*). They thought, rightly or wrongly, that the French-speaking people of Manitoba were family, by virtue of a commonality of language and religion. These characteristics—language and religion—were primary for them, and sufficient to claim a bond of kinship.

When we frame the past, we are always doing so in the present—in *our* present. We are tempted to read history teleologically, as if the self-understandings of people in the past were the evolutionary record of our present; we project into the past how we understand ourselves in the present. But many of our ancestors very likely thought of *themselves* as the culmination of history. And they may have construed their history in ways in which we would not approve, in ways we would consider problematic. They may have described themselves with terms that meant something different in their day; or they may have used more than one term that they thought were synonymous but that we do not. The research of Foxcurran and associates suggests that our nineteenth-century forebears lived in a complex world of identity, one that does not fit neatly within our taxonomies, a world in which language and religion formed boundary lines almost as fixed and seemingly unbridgeable as the racial boundaries of today.

A history that meets exigent political needs—a usable past—is often constrained to brutally simple dichotomies, forced to clean-up messy truths, and to portray the past in terms that do not suit it.<sup>5</sup> But the past surprises us. It is rarely what we expect it to be. Even when we get to know them, it is difficult to get our ancestors to behave themselves and accommodate the boxes we make for them.

What's most valuable in *Songs* is not necessarily the stand it takes for or against the usage of a particular term, but rather its courage in complexifying history, in engaging with a buried chapter, and in drawing our attention to important questions of race, language, and identity in North America.

-David Vermette

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase “usable past” is from Candace Savage’s *Strangers in the House* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2019), 69.



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2020

## Review: Fruits of Perseverance: The French Presence in the Detroit River Region, 1701-1815 by Guillaume Teasdale

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### Recommended Citation

LaForest, James (2020) "Review: Fruits of Perseverance: The French Presence in the Detroit River Region, 1701-1815 by Guillaume Teasdale," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/20>

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**REVIEW: Teasdale, Guillaume. *Fruits of Perseverance: The French Presence in the Detroit River Region, 1701-1815*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018. 240 p., paper. ISBN: 9780773555013**

In the preface to his *Fruits of Perseverance*, Professor Guillaume Teasdale intimates that the work is not only a result of his own research and that of student research assistants, but it is also a supplement to the efforts of many other researchers, projects, and collections that have made his own research possible. This is an admirable recognition of the many local and regional historians, both professional and independent, who have done the yeoman's work for many years keeping the history of French Detroit from falling into obscurity.

My own interest in this book and the topic it explores is from the perspective of an independent lay researcher and descendant of the early settlers at Detroit. My interest in the surviving French Canadian and Métis culture in the Detroit River Region has led me to explore the history, genealogy, folklore, and oral traditions of the region for the benefit of those who seek to (re)build and reimagine these cultures for the twenty-first century without sacrificing their inherent qualities. This book brings to light how the cultural landscape of early Detroit impacted the real geography of the land and how that continues to reverberate today.

From the book's very beginning, Teasdale closely examines land organization in early Detroit and the aspirations of its founder, Antoine Cadillac, in the context of building a new settlement far from the more established communities of the Saint Lawrence River. Exploring archaic colonial land organization practices, in which self-serving officials had long ago muddied the waters, is a difficult task, but Teasdale admirably presents the confusing world of *seigneuries*, *compagnies*, land grants, and *notaires* in as uncomplicated a way as possible.

There is limited discussion of the presence of indigenous communities and voyageurs around Fort Ponchartrain, which many readers might be seeking, but the chief merit of the book's first two chapters is in laying bare the decades it took for Detroit to coalesce as a community with sound leadership. The question of the status of the settlement left Detroit in a confused state for decades. According to Teasdale, it was the mid-eighteenth century before settlement activity began to increase with the arrival of a new convoy of settlers sponsored by the King.

The middle chapters comprise the conceptual and material heart of the book: a description of land ownership among French Canadians in the region under successive French, British, and American rule. With regime changes in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries came new policies that had serious impact on the French speakers who had settled on both sides of the Detroit River beginning in 1701. Teasdale examines the administration of land at Detroit by Cadillac himself, by a French governor general and intendant of New France, then under a

*seigneurie directe* system, where land grants are given to settlers directly on behalf of the French king. It is through this grant system which, according to Teasdale, the *habitants* developed a deep attachment to the land. Later, under British control, the situation of the French Canadians at Detroit entered a period of uncertainty with regard to property rights. However, as their main occupation was farming and the British needed their help in order to supply troops on the frontier, the French Canadians' situation was not as precarious as it otherwise might have been. On the one hand, a significant aspect of local French culture was eliminated with the erasure of traditionally public domains (like Hog Island [*Île aux Cochons*], which would become Belle Isle) but on the other, the *habitants* were ultimately able to retain their private property rights and, in doing so, continue to influence their surroundings in small but meaningful ways.

The tenacity with which the Detroit French retained their sense of ownership and place over the region for many generations left cultural markers both on the map and among their descendants. Teasdale examines one aspect of this in particular: the orchards for which the local French population was long known. Detroit as a locus for fruit growing was observed over two decades prior to the establishment of Fort Pontchartrain, when Recollet missionary Louis Hennepin noted an abundance of wild fruit trees growing on the banks of the river in the 1670s. The French Canadian *habitants* and Jesuits later became associated with the planting of pear and apple trees. The orchards and their products were of great renown and the pear tree came to symbolize the French presence in the region, retaining its association even after 300 years. Recently the Jesuit or French Pear of the region has been added to the Slow Food Movement's "Ark of Taste" thanks to the efforts of French Canadian descendants and cultural activists from the area.

But even beyond the cultural symbolism, for Teasdale the orchards are emblematic of something more essential: the very nature of the Detroit settlement. Teasdale posits that Detroit, rather than being a frontier settlement on the far reaches of empire in which French and Indian relations were prominent, and where the French Canadians lived their own unique blend of French and North American life, was more akin to a Norman village. Teasdale explored this perspective in depth in his dissertation, "The French of Orchard Country: Territory, Landscape and Ethnicity in the Detroit River region, 1680s-1810s." (York University, 2010.) This view, shared by many scholars, might be best encapsulated by Teasdale's statement at the end of Chapter 6 that the popular conception of the Detroit River Region French as the "Muskrat French" is a mistaken cultural identity emanating from derogatory, "imperialist narratives." A debate about the role of fur trading and its cultural impact in the region has led many writers to come to a similar conclusion, asserting generally that Indigenous peoples and French Canadian traders and *habitants* had only

minor relations during the French era, and that the notion of a Métis settlement or cultural characteristics in the area was impossible. Furthermore, these scholars largely rule out the development of a unique local culture, borne of extensive cross-cultural interaction among *habitants*, indigenous people, and voyageurs. Yet the characterization of Detroit as a Norman village, intrinsically similar to other French Canadian villages along the St. Lawrence River and therefore familiar to French travelers from outside the region, is not universally held. Other scholars have published studies that reveal a more robust interaction between the French Canadians and indigenous communities, which influenced the development of the cultural landscape of Detroit and the wider region, the *Pays d'en haut* or Upper Country.

*Fruits of Perseverance* ends with an examination of the impact of the international border at Detroit. As the author writes, the impact was not felt overnight, however trade and family ties were gradually lessened as more concrete authority was imposed on trade and border crossings. One consequence of this was a more rapid assimilation of the French on the north side of the Detroit River (American Detroit) than occurred on the south side (British Assumption/Windsor). The French influence on the political, economic, and social life of Detroit waned through the first half of the nineteenth century and became largely insignificant in the affairs of the city from that point on.

As many academic monographs tend to be, *Fruits of Perseverance* is of fairly narrow scope, focused largely on settlement patterns and land use and the impact of land management systems on the French Canadians of the area. The perspective employed is one in which Detroit is assumed to be not only an entirely European (Norman) construct, but that its turn-of-the-century culture and legacy rule out any other interpretation. It is an important historical perspective, yet one that is at odds with historical and more contemporary perspectives among historians, as well as among descendants of the original *habitants*, or the descendants of voyageurs, some of whom were Métis. And even though *Fruits of Perseverance* is an easy-reading academic work, it will not be accessible to all readers. Teasdale refrains from extensive academic jargon, but the bulk of the work as a discussion of administrative matters involving land ownership in French Detroit is understandably somewhat dry. Chapters 6 and 7 (“French Orchards” and “Divided by the Border”) may hold more appeal for the general reader. Those readers looking for details of family history will likely be disappointed, but for those whose ancestors appear in the work it will be well worth adding to the family library. Relatively short, the extensive citations and academic imprimatur will undoubtedly make this a monograph that holds its importance in the field of New France history for a long time and will be cited in many forthcoming works. I recommend it for local and academic

libraries, and for those readers who seek a fuller understanding of the history of the Detroit River Region and its original inhabitants.

-James LaForest