



MONSIEUR
AMBIVALENCE

a post literate fable



THOMAS FULLER

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So we never live, but we hope to live.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*

One reader called *Monsieur Ambivalence* "an old fashioned experimental novel and a new fangled sermon or screed in which the individual is all-or-nothing, both a stranger in a strange land and all too familiar to himself."

The writer of this book thinks this a fair reading of the work, believing this early and innocent reader to be sensitive to the writer's intention, but remains open to the possibility of other interpretations and even welcomes them.

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BOOK ONE

Finally, let them recognize that there are two kinds of people one can call reasonable; those who serve God with all their heart because they know Him, and those who seek Him with all their heart because they do not know Him.

Pascal, *Pensees*

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IDENTITY AND
DIRECTION

Where am I? A good question, and much more appropriate than the old baroque question, *who am I?*

I'm right here at the moment trying as hard as I've ever tried to be here, the abrupt first child of Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Fuller, both deceased, allegedly leaving the United States tomorrow to live in a village in the middle of France with a woman named Helena. I like staring out of windows but don't do it enough, to take some alcohol every evening, first something white and then red, and to write poems I never seem to finish. I have a weakness for tv, and am moving to France without one. I read at least 200 books a year, trying to read good books I don't understand, like the book I'm reading now, *Pensees*, by Blaise Pascal. I'm either pleased or displeased by my life or both, but there's very little about me I wouldn't like to change at some point under the right circumstances.

Helena said France. It was a place where no one knew me and I knew no one. I didn't speak the language, a real blessing it turns out. I'd have time to read and think while shedding previous influences. I could say *yes* or I could say *no*.

If I said, *yes, I'll go to France*, it was to see if I could sit alone in a room by myself for one hour as instructed by Blaise Pascal.

If I said *no*, the answer would destroy the illusion I had about living in a small village. I could start living my life over again, someplace far from the people and life I'd known.

I must have said *yes* at some point for Helena and several others say they have pictures: that I lived in the village of Montaignut and walked upstairs to the terrace in the petit maison every morning for at least one hour to write in the yellow notebook I bought at Auchan in Clermont-Ferrand.

If I say *no, I'm not going*, as I believe in retrospect I might have said, I would not know what I know now, though what I know now comes close to nothing and was told to me in a language I have no hope of understanding.

YES SITS As I'm in the habit of living my life in terms of
QUIETLY what my life is not, a large part of me is French,
for it is French to define things by what they are not. Pascal claims all the
discord in the world arises from man's inability to sit quietly in his cham-
ber, irrespective of one's ability to eat the bread and drink the wine of
France. If I say *yes*, it's only to see if I can sit quietly in a room for one hour.

MAKING A PLAN The plan: Helena and I will walk Paris for two
 weeks, bike the Loire from Blois to Angers, put
the bikes on the train at Angers to Clermont-Ferrand, bike from the sta-
tion to the little village. Jean-Claude will wait up for me, roll a cigarette,
take me in to see Simone, his partner. Somehow we'll communicate. I'll
be properly fed, the cheese of the Auvergne, especially Pavin and St.
Nectaire, has many adherents and Jean Claude always buys good wine,
Bordeaux's and Rhone's.

Only five people are concerned now that Teradact's out of the picture—
Helena, Jean-Claude and Simone, Monica and Robaire (poor Robaire,
robbed of his happiness and sent back to Brussels without cigarettes)—
and all of them, except Helena, still live far away in a little village in the
midst of the Auvergne, France, except Monica and Robaire, who haven't
kept in touch since moving to Belgium.

TRUTH AS A Wasting time's expected of me—doing nothing,
SERIES OF ASIDES entertaining or being entertained, thinking about
what time might be—it's what I'm expecting of myself. I'm supposed to
be doing nothing in real life. I walk without thinking and I walk not to think.
If a thought comes I think it, I'm looking for its truth.

Since Truths are few and farther from me than they once were, I have
to start small. Helena and I eat well, and we share our food with others.
Therefore I could be eating a tomato when I die, it's possible a tomato is
the last thing I'll ever see. That's how death works, it takes away the per-
son you thought you had to be all the time you were thinking about who
you might be. When you die you won't be thinking about yourself, this
much is certain.

The truth's easy once you start saying it, but difficult at first; you're not
used to it. You see it's not truth you're thinking but you think it's truth,

you think it into truth. Then there are the truths themselves, independent of the others, true because they contradict you. A truth like this either happens all at once or takes forever, depending on how smart you are or how open your heart is. It changes you a lot, and if you keep saying it and saying it nothing else is ever the same or as satisfying and you become a true listener.

At first when you start telling the truth you'll feel mostly dead, what being dead could feel like, and want to start telling lies all over the place. I didn't know what else to do. Other people seemed to know what to do, not me, I didn't. Other people seem to know everything. It's my fate to be ambivalent, it's as bad as smiling at the times you don't want to smile, or having to be around people you don't want to be around, or wanting a cigarette. Since I've started telling the truth I've had this thought more than once—*that truth is time, changing*

Truth is time changing
 Truth is
 Time, changing

TRUTH
 IS TIME,
 CHANGING

Truth
 is time changing

A comma can change everything! A comma's importance can't be over-emphasized. Philosophers, poets, saints know a whole life can be devoted to nothing more than how one thinks about a comma.

PRE-AMBIVALENCE Helena says *I always seem to be offended and put upon to do anything*, she says *I sigh* as I work and *complain constantly*. Not until later in the story does she say I'm ambivalent, and she has the right, she's right here with me.

If I go to France with Helena—I'm not saying I will—it's for silence, to receive the rewards of not-having to talk. Not knowing the language I can cure the garrulousness that plagues me.

Even with Jean-Claude and Simone, my friends, Helena takes care of the conversation. I sit and eat and drink wine and roll an occasional cigarette

from Jean-Claude's tobacco, getting permission by a glance, by miming the gesture of rolling a smoke. Jean-Claude understands I like to roll my own rather than having him roll them for me.

I usually bring wine to his house, a bottle of white and a bottle of red, though Jean-Claude won't open one or the other, insists on walking down by himself to his *cave* to bring up three or four bottles of his own—usually three reds and one white, the red usually from the same maker and vintage, for he buys his red wine by the case when he finds what he likes. One month it's Bordeaux, the next Chateaufort de Pape. He always buys from the maker himself, takes time with the winemaker, drinking a bottle or two with him, one of the very few times Jean-Claude travels anywhere, other than to drive to work at the tire factory in Clermont-Ferrand or to his sister's in Issoire.



We always start with white, starting with white is the right way to do things in France, the proper progression, an Aligote or a Sancerre, but we never start with the white wine I've brought. Sometimes he doesn't bring up another white and we've already drunk the white I've brought, and we sit there looking at one another like we've made a mistake but have decided not to talk about it.

Jean-Claude's a great preserver of things, just short of a scavenger. The house he shares with Simone was once the GRANGE, (grange), a barn built in the 13th century, he says. (I believe him, Simone says it too and she was born in the house). It was once her grandfather's, who permitted his

son to turn it into a bar and a dancehall when Simone was a little girl, an occurrence that makes her cry every time she thinks about it.

The cave's such a legend in the village that no one's ever seen it. Peter the Dutchman, who speaks very good English and owns a ruin in the village, says Jean-Claude keeps a Volkswagen built by the Nazis in the 1940s there; he claims he saw it when Jean-Claude left the cave's wooden doors open on a hot summer day. Peter told Jean-Claude he'd seen the car,

Jean-Claude denied it, said the car was an Opel.

It was blue, Jean-Claude said to Peter. *You saw a blue Opel, Peter, that's what you saw,* laughed the whole thing off.

Peter's sure he saw a row of toy dolls neatly perched on a shelf and puppets hanging by their strings from the ceiling, but says he never mentioned this to Jean-Claude.

The relationship's different now. Peter thinks Jean-Claude is such a private man he felt violated by what Peter had seen. He worries about Jean-Claude's drinking, having found empty bottles of Ricard pastis in the weeds beside his house, claiming he saw Simone's poodles there and that *the dogs never went anywhere without Jean-Claude.*

PHILOSOPHY'S THE
RIGHT WAY TO LIVE

When someone asks, *what do you do?*— and they shouldn't—I say, *I do philosophy.* The philosophers themselves say they *do* philosophy, beginning with Wittgenstein, the Austrian, though it might have been Baudrillard or Derrida (Frenchmen). It doesn't seem possible that Descartes or Montaigne or even Pascal would have said that they *do* philosophy had they been asked, though they were philosophers. The question itself—*what do you do?*—presupposes that one's identity is gained by how one makes a living, by what is done with the majority of one's time. I make it a point to never ask another person what they *do*. If I'm asked, I answer that *I do philosophy,* and I usually don't like the person who asks.

I've never been asked *what do you do?* in France, a big plus in its favor. Jean-Claude never asked, *what do you do?* The question wouldn't occur to him. He either already knows the answer or simply doesn't care, he knows what I do has nothing to do with who I am. If I said to him, *you know Jean-Claude, what I do is to do nothing,* he'd understand. But if I said to him, *philosophy is what I do,* he'd pretend he didn't hear me.

I learn a great deal by staring at someone's mouth as they speak, without fear they will notice I am staring, as what they are saying is paramount to them, so that it excludes me, the listener, to the degree it cancels any suspicion they may have that they are being inspected. I watch the way the words leave the speaker's mouth, especially the mouth corners, the position of the lips, the posture of the chin holding the lips that form the words they are saying...

...Helena speaks French, her feet on the ground in regard to language, she's as proudly humble of her ability to speak as I am of my inability. She's committed to France, there's no ambivalence. Jean-Claude speaks of her *peasant-like strength*, means it as a compliment. He might be talking about her body, it's possible, angular and solid, lean and sturdy, a functional artist, a potter and clothes-maker. Her friends don't speak French as she speaks, if they can be said to speak French at all, but speak it for some unspeakable purpose. They like the sound of it as they've heard it spoken by the French, but the minute they touch down in Paris they abandon the language, afraid they'll say the wrong thing. They must think language is a virtue toward which one aspires; hearing French spoken in France and not understanding a word, they never fail to give up trying to speak it.

I don't know what I'd do with the language if I had it, I'd have to Talk To People. I let French be translated, only knowing a word here and there, having no other choice but to let others do the talking for me if anything needs to be said. Helena translates, which stops the conversation a moment or two after it begins, then Jean-Claude picks out one or two of the several English words he knows and pounds them to death for my sake, a word like *perhaps*, which is now our favorite word together. *Perhaps* he says in English, *peut-etre* I say in French.

Would Jean-Claude learn English if he come to America? **No!** If I know any French I learned it from him, so I hardly feel any need to speak French at all. O, some words here and there with Jean-Claude in the privacy of his home, perhaps if we're drinking wine and goofing around, and then only for fun. I'm always expected to allow for his English more than he is to allow for my French; this is understood between us. Jean-Claude leaves himself undefined just like me, so he can go on ahead and become who he is.

I could learn the language I guess, but **WHY?** I like not knowing what's being said around me all the time, in not having language, as it may or may not give advantage to my experience. Pictures support me instead, and birdsong and a pieces of really good bread. When I break a piece of bread off the whole white stick, I want to write a poem about listening to birds while holding a bird in my hand and feeling along its throat as it sings. I could even twist its neck, it's just another few words.

I speak English and my sister is a boy, Jean-Claude says. I laugh, always laugh when he says something to me in French, it's like I'm speaking French to him when I laugh, he seems to understand. Otherwise I say, *ce vous plaît* or something else in French and he pretends he understands.

INTRODUCING

MONSIEUR

AMBIVALENCE

We're staying in a little hotel along the Loire. I've registered as Monsieur Ambivalence. I'm trying to read Blaise Pascal in bed. Helena's asleep beside me.

Every night I try to read a little in *Pensees*, sometimes only one or two things, before I sleep. It's a habit—not that I understand or agree with Pascal when I do understand. I'm interested in him as the *other*, someone opposite, someone who knows more, whose knowledge is original. Knowing Pascal's a reflection on those who don't know him, there are far more who don't know Pascal than those who know him and far fewer who could say anything about him should his name be brought into a conversation, though it never is. Some of his entries intrigue me to the degree that I read them twice, three times; some are boring and I want to edit, reduce to one or two lines and make minimalist poems of them; some I skip completely.

Pensees was assembled after his death. I'm reading it by chance, having found a copy of the book in the waiting room of the airport. If I hadn't known Blaise Pascal until now, I should have. It was my mistake.

If somebody asks me, why are you living in a village in France, I'll say, To learn to sit quietly in a room by myself for one hour. That's in his book. Pascal thinks that all world problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room by himself for an hour.

I've started to make notes in the margins of *Pensees*:

How large France must have looked to Pascal, from the top of puy-de-Dome, how vast and in need of his thinking, which looks both focused and boundless—he invented the first calculator, among other things—and how small it all seems to Helena and I as we make our way through the Loire Valley toward the village that we did not yet know we were coming to.

Helena's still sleeping.

I haven't told her that I'd used her name for me—Monsieur Ambivalence. She seems to be looking at me in a new way, as if I am becoming a

different person to her. Perhaps it's the biking, that I'm a follower, that it's a time when we can be both alone and have our own thoughts about each other, watching ourselves move through the countryside in black clothes. Our conversation's better, even the silences, and though we still disagree the spaces in our disagreements are becoming larger, more expansive, big enough for both of us to be together when we're disagreeing.

CROISSANTS FOR BREAKFAST We discuss the route early in the morning, after coffee, bread and butter. She keeps the map in the pocket of her biking shirt, takes it out, spreads it on the breakfast table. *We're just outside Saumur, we'll be traveling toward Tours. If you want to stop at a chateau let me know now. I'd rather not, but we can if you want. There's lots of them, chateaus,* she says. I pretend to look at the map with her. She traces the route with her finger until I nod. It's like we're deciding where to go together, but really we're not, it's already been decided. Helena's a good navigator, she likes maps, she's able to open them and fold them back into the form they were opened from. I can't open and close a map properly and have given up. The whole idea of reading a map seems archaic, I'd rather just get going, even the wrong way.

At breakfast, Helena butters a roll and looks at the map of the Loire. I start talking about what she'd said about me, about being *French all my life*:

I don't disagree Helena, though I'm not sure what you mean when you say that I'm French. I think you say it because you want me to be French!

Keep in mind how disillusioned I was when I found Jean-Claude watching television, that he had a room dedicated to it in his old stone house and watched continuously!

He sits in his big round camp chair, with the yellow canvas stretched around blue steel supports, staring at the tv. Watches anything—soccer games, game shows, movies, old Joe Cocker concerts. He barely looked up when I'd come in the room. O, he'd sit up finally—seeing me there—and say hello, show some life, open a bottle of wine or roll a cigarette, but it was like I'd broken a spell.

Jean-Claude knew he'd ruined the image I had of him though I had no image, other than that of a man who knew what was proper, for 'proper' is his favorite word. A restaurant is either proper or it is not. A household is run properly or it isn't. He used the word 'correct' the same way. Jean-Claude is

able to make a pronouncement without being judgmental. I envy him this quality. I wish I could be more like him, but I can't.

It was disappointing Helena, I swear to God. The glow of the tv in house after house, that coy, brutish blue light that only a tv can make, subtly seeping through the lace curtains and out onto the little streets. It was so incongruous that it was worse than being at home. They were supposed to be in those stone houses reading. Or fucking. Or having wine or coffees and sitting at wooden tables, talking, not watching tv.

Helena eats while I talk. She looks like she's already heard what I'm saying and knows everything I don't know. She looks at me like a writer who's stepped away from a piece of writing for a few minutes and sees what's wrong with it immediately upon returning

FINALLY, *Her roll*, she calls it, as opposed to my roll which
 BREAKFAST ARRIVES is separate and which I've not yet touched, a
 croissant to her French roll, is *good* but *would be better if it was heated*
up a bit.

We're the only people in the dining room, so cold we see our breath. I put my hands around the coffee cup, wondering if there's any cognac around. She won't look at me; I know what she's thinking, she's reading her mind out loud to me! She's sure she's right, and if she's right then I'm wrong. She looks like she's always living real life. I hope one day I will become as sure of things as she is and look the way she looks.

She speaks of my *being French*, but I had such naïve ideas of what their lives were about, about what my life might become if I moved there. Inside, behind those stone walls, I thought everyone in the village was reading and thinking, I mistook quietness for inwardness.



I felt missing from my life, I'd come to France to get away from the life I was living, to read *Pensees* over and over again and to write every day so

that I might better understand. I thought this was a place that had everything I didn't have, and I'd come to try to learn to sit quietly in a room by myself for one hour. At least I'd be doing something good for myself, the other things I needed in my life could come forward from that point. Maybe I'd take something I learned home with me. I didn't want to just drag my problem from one country to another, but what else could I do? The relationship I want with Pascal—to attempt to put into action the observation that all the world's problems come from man's inability to sit alone in a room, calmly, for one hour—may or may not be the right thing, admits to some self-sacrifice but seems like the only course of action I can take.

I thought everyone in the village was of the same mind, of similar spirit. But they weren't, they lived as far from themselves as I did, and farther.

I'M WHAT Almost always I follow, out of some false sense
FOLLOWS of wanting to protect Helena, to be there if she

falls, not only to make sure she's going the right way. I'm de facto navigator, a back-up, I'm the one last chance of seeing a sign before it's missed. When she's up ahead, I can't help but think about the past. How short her hair was in the old days, how she'd changed from being beautiful to being ordinary the moment she'd cut it. I said I loved her then, and I had but I hadn't. And now her hair's long again and she's put it in a braid; I watch her braid as I follow her on my bicycle.

Helena rides so far in front of me that I lose sight of her and feel compelled to push myself forward, pedaling as hard as I can to catch up, as if it's a competition, and pass her and ride in front for a mile or two. I don't say a word when I pass, hoping she'll feel by not hearing a word that we are two different people, people so different as to be unknown to one another. Once I'm past her I wonder why I made the effort and drop back once again to the rear, to return to being the follower.

Helena often stands up on her bike, riding up one of the small hills of the Loire Valley like it's much smaller than the larger hills she rides at home. She's not large, but her energy is so thoroughly organized into its physical intention that she seems to be challenging the hill itself; there's not one millimeter of doubt in any motion she makes.

From a distance, I make a list of questions I'd like to ask her if we were riding together and she could hear me:

Is it the same here as it is there or is it perhaps worse here, since we expect so many things to change when we travel?

Am I giving my life away to you, or are you giving your life away to me?

I'm hungry, I want to get off the bike, take a nap in the sun. I'm always hungry in France, but a big meal at noon isn't a good idea. She thinks it's dumb to eat much while we're biking. A glass or two of white wine at lunch is out of the question. The wine will come later, at dinner I hope. Perhaps we'll order a second bottle and talk.

WINE *Now that I'm rich I want to be poor, I say to*
WITH DINNER *Helena at dinner.*

She's listening, so I continue.

*All I can think of is not being here. I want to leave but it's like wanting to rest and hoping to go forward at the same time. What I really want is not to be bothered, to do nothing, to eat good food and drink good wine. Perhaps it's impossible, perhaps Aristotle is correct, I can't have one until I've eliminated the other—**The Principle of Non-Contradiction and The Principle of the Excluded Middle**—most fundamental of starting points.*

Helena says nothing, so I keep talking.

Who knows whether it will be any different in France than it was back there? I don't. I'm sure I don't want the kind of life Jean-Claude and Simone have, living in the home of their ancestors, surrounded by stone walls so thick they break drill bits, living like they have to walk down to the cemetery every day to put a flower on a family grave. The French believe too much in a beginning, middle and end. I'm not that sort of man, Helena. I don't even like what I'm good at, for instance. I don't like to think that much. I only like the way I feel in moderation. When I think I want to write, for instance, and when I actually write, it feels like I'm reaching down into a trashcan until I touch the bottom.

Helena responds.

You give too much thought to things, you care too much what other people think. There's no need to say anything to anybody, you're under no obligation. If they ask, say you're going to France to eat the cheese and drink the wine. Tell them you're going to France to learn to rest. What's wrong with that?

You've made friends much too easily here; you don't have to know a soul there. Here it's possible that you've surrounded yourself with people so incapable of introspection, as you like to say, that you've become one of them! It's fascinating to me that your need to be liked by others surpasses your need to love yourself. It's an illusion that you're loved here anyway.

Helena keeps talking, seeing that I am looking her in the eye.

I want to live in a place where it doesn't make a difference how much money I have or don't have, to live in a way that I don't have to worry about money or what it means anymore. It's time to see how little I can live on, not how much. And I can live on less there than I do here. I'm tired of being defined by who I know or don't know. I'm tired of eating steak, I don't want to eat steak anymore, I don't even like steak.

We'll take the petit maison. Remember how thick the walls are? I'll cook, you fill up the cave with wine. I don't mind, drink as much wine as you want. Go down to the cave every night. Find a nice bottle of wine, come up, cut a wedge of St. Nectaire or Cantal, pull apart some bread, sit down, drink the wine, and write in your yellow notebook.

Plot? All plot is a straight line that becomes a curve or a curve that becomes a straight line in regard to France. Here's the plot. Get out of the things you're in. Conclude things as quickly and as honorably as possible and leave. Can't you see? Where you are now isn't good for you!

Helena sees I'm listening, and continues.

Teradact understands; Jean-Claude gets it. You're brother gargoyles. I've seen you in the street with Jean-Claude, talking and laughing. I don't know how you do it, how you communicate without speaking French! Somehow you manage. It's a miracle! And they like you, every single one of them, even the women, Simone, Monica, Christiana, and the old lady who has the keys to the church...Marionette, yes that's it, the old lady who walks down the hill for bread every morning, the one who keeps the goat in her backyard.

We'll put everything in two bags, one black and one red. We won't take much. Just some clothes and a couple of books. "Pensees." I know how attached you are to that book. I don't know Why? There's no plot for godsakes. If there is one, show me. Please show me! I've looked at Pascal's book—in the original—and I didn't see a plot. As far as I can see it's a nice book of sayings, of observations. Pascal? Isn't he the one who said that the last thing a writer finds is the beginning of the book he's going to write? Pascal has that right, I'll give

that to him. You know, don't you, that he was born in Clermont- Ferrand, not far from the village? And take Montaigne too, he'd be good for you now.

Helena doesn't stop talking.

You think it's impossible? It's time you fell off the face of the earth! Can't you see that's why Teradact chose to live here? Now there's some real information for you. And if you must have a reason, say you're going to eat the cheese and drink the wine. And don't smoke. You must promise, no smoking. That was absurd, smoking those awful French cigarettes until you made yourself sick.

It's my turn to say something, it must be my turn as there's the silence that has to be filled by the person last spoken to:

Helena, let me see if I understand. You want to live where it no longer matters how much money you have or don't have. You want to fall off the face of the earth and not eat meat. I am a meat eater. Steaks and chops, boudin, veal, chicken and rabbit in mustard sauce, terrines, pates, those kind of things. As to smoking, I suppose I could smoke if I smoked only those cigarettes I rolled from Jean-Claude's tobacco, and only on special occasions.

This is not to say I'm going to live in France. There are complications in my case that are not in your case.

Perhaps I'll flip a coin. A coin flip is legitimate, in the spirit of the thing. Blaise Pascal wasn't averse to gambling; Marcel Duchamp made life decisions based on a coin toss. Pascal said it was better to bet on there being a God than to bet on there not being one. Duchamp tossed a coin to decide whether he should leave Paris for New York, whether to make a certain piece of art, where to hide from the Nazis and so on...

Helena, you believe I've said yes when what I've meant to say is maybe, or perhaps.

Ordering a bottle of Loire Sancerre, Domaine Durand, at the nice little bistro near Autun, Helena drinks two glasses more than she usually drinks, which is usually one glass, and says something like,

Poor man, she says, close your eyes. Imagine you've been walking from village to village, through the fields and over the hills from Solignat to Collanges. It's late afternoon, you're tired, you need to rest. I push on the door of the little church in Collanges—you're not sure I should—and to your surprise the door opens. There's no one inside. It's cool and empty. You walk into the church and sit down and close your eyes and you meditate, of all things

you meditate. For the first time in years you hear yourself, you hear your heart beating, you hear your breath. Hearing yourself, you hear how mad, how stupid your other life has been, that part of your life you were living away from this place.

You see, Helena says, you've been French all your life.

Late at night in a small hotel along the Loire, one
YELLOW of the places we'd find along the way when we
NOTEBOOK were tired of biking, choosing a place for its price
and the quality of its beds, I begin to write in a yellow notebook I bought
in the Auchan department store in Clermont-Ferrand when I lived in
France:

The Church in Collanges

It's exactly the way silence likes things—only some stones that have stayed together for centuries and a couple of windows for light— but it's not really architecture. Nothing's already happened here, nothing's happening again. You can't be afraid to open the door. Push, push, it doesn't take much.

CIGARETTES Every evening Jean-Claude smokes hand-rolled
cigarettes, leaning out over the bottom half of
the Dutch door, looking out at as much of the village as he can see, which isn't much and is therefore all he needs: the old main road of the village before the main road had been relocated down below beside the river when automobiles took over, the white and blue ceramic Michelin signs from the turn of the century still posted on the sides of buildings down there (nothing that anyone other than a tourist might notice).

Jean-Claude knows everybody. He waves from the doorway, exchanges greetings with passersby, laughing and smoking, even when there's no one there, as there so often isn't. Not that he could see everything from the door, the street was narrow and the outlook from the door cramped, really no view at all other than that of Peter the Dutchman's restored ruin and the vacant ruin beside it. People do come to Jean-Claude every so often, the news always gets through. You can see him now, leaning out over his Dutch door, smoking, his eye-glasses on a chain around his neck.

I don't know if Jean-Claude even reads, or can read for that matter, though I suppose he must. He has a job, he has to be able to read. The

books in the house belong to Simone, picture books of The Auvergne, its mineral springs, mushrooms, the old churches and abbeys...the closest I'd come to see Jean-Claude reading is when he uses the local newspaper to roll cigarettes on, to catch crumbs of tobacco. ...

...Ok, he doesn't read. The local paper maybe, old Tin-Tin books. He watches tv and smokes and drinks red wine, Simone says he watches for hours. If he isn't watching tv, he's thinking of watching tv. Jean-Claude disappoints me, all of them watch tv, continuously. Every night I walk down the hill from the petit maison to the river and every night in every house I pass I see the glow of their televisions bouncing off stone walls. If there's one image that preserves the spirit of the VILLAGE ANCIEN, it's blue light as seen through lace curtains.

If I say *yes, I'm going to France*, I'll say it because I'm committed to learning to sit alone in a room by myself for one hour.

B O O K T W O

I cannot judge of my work, while doing it. I must do as the artists, stand at a distance, but not too far. How far, then? Guess.

Pascal, *Pensees*

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BEGINNING
TO GET RID OF
THE GREAT NEED
TO BE RIGHT

What to take, to leave behind? I've forgotten something I've remembered. No, I've remembered something I've forgotten. Yes, I've forgotten something; yes I took too much. No, I took too little. No, I've not forgotten after all; yes, I've remembered.

I am right that I was wrong and you were right more often than I. I denied your rightness from the beginning in direct proportion to my wrongness from the start. You are right more often than I think you are; I don't yet know after our time in France why I always think you wrong from the from the very first thing you say, since you are so often right from the beginning.

You said *turn here*, not long after reciting the poem by Verlaine—the one about the moon—trying to teach me the language by saying French poems and songs. I saw the castle and the church; you saw the sign to the *village ancien*. I followed what you said, driving up hill into the heart of the village.

It's the right time of evening to arrive.

The village smells of fresh milk, a roasted chicken, goat cheese. I see the village as a foot inside a shoe, that it fits into what's meant to be hidden.

They're all there at the beginning—Jean-Claude and Simone, Robaire and Monica, Peter the Dutchman, one or two others—standing in the square beside the old fountain in the evening, visiting. I didn't know them then, didn't know they were standing beside the fountain as they did every evening when it was warm and tolerable. It's in my notes, in one of the yellow notebooks. I even remember the clothes Jean-Claude was wearing—a white tee underneath an unbuttoned long-sleeve denim shirt, black Levi's. I was sure he wore an earring but I was wrong, it only seemed he wore an earring. Jean-Claude stood out, more dangerous than the others. I could imagine him carrying a knife and he did, as I discovered later. He had the most presence.

Well, I tried to keep quiet that day, didn't I Helena?

I tried to be a different person.

Bonsoir was all I said, a good French word. But *Bonsoir* went right past them. They stared, not as if I'd said the wrong thing but as if I spoke a foreign language!

I was so used to doing the talking. Perhaps that's why I wasn't understood...*bonsoir*, how hard is that to say? How hard is it to understand a word like *bonsoir*? Perhaps those who heard me that day were protecting their territory by not understanding.

I learned then to be quiet if I could, silent if at all possible. Such a stance might permit me access to become a philosopher.

PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEM God I resent hearing English in France, in a restaurant or a hotel or on the radio...is it wrong that I hate hearing English spoken in France when English is all I can speak?

...the deep psychological problems of mine Helena identified in Brittany might be addressed if I only listened.

Buy sunglasses she suggested in Brioude after that terrible incident with the waiter. *This is a culture*, she said, *that directs itself to the male. If you don't wish to be addressed, avoid eye contact.*

MONIQUE'S RESTAURANT Helena and I walked the village, top to bottom. It seemed to have everything each of us wanted and needed, it affirmed that our wants and our needs were good for us. It smelled like it was being cooked in fresh butter.

We ate dinner in Monique's restaurant on the road at the bottom of the hill. Monique was so proud of the place, a plain storefront on the main road below the village, *L' Table de Monique*.

She'd designed a little cocktail bar of river rock where three people could sit. Helena and I sat there and she poured us each a glass of Cahors without asking, then sat down beside us—though she shouldn't have, she should have put all her energy into her restaurant—and told us her story: born in Sapchat, two or three villages up the road, joined the circus and left for North Africa, (an acrobat or juggler, one of the two). Returned to France, settled in Marseilles, then Paris, learned to cook. She had dark circles around her eyes, indicating either instability or deep unhappiness, or both, though in retrospect I knew nothing of her problem at the time.

Monique insisted we order truffade, the dish of the region, made of potatoes, milk and cheese, the specialty of the house. I asked her if I'd be able to sleep if I ate such a rich dish. *You will if you drink enough wine*, she said.

There were only three other diners in the restaurant, a couple and a single man. The man had his head down on the table-top like he'd had a heart attack. I asked Monique if an ambulance should be called and she said no, that he ate there frequently and always put his head on the table after he ate entrecote. *He'll wake up soon*, she said, *or else we'll lock him up and he'll sleep here all night*. Monique treated us like Helena was a queen. Monique understood Helena, they all understood Helena, everyone, wherever we traveled in France. In the Ardeche she'd had trouble with Patois, but we weren't in the Ardeche we were in the Auvergne and she talked with them, not a lot as she was still so new, but enough for them to remember her and talk about us later.

In any case, Monique's gone, drowned in the river, a *suicide*, Jean-Claude says. The restaurant's dark now, though if you stand close enough to the window you can see the tables, the little bar, the river rock. I swear that you can see all Monique's hopes and dreams sitting there behind the dirty windows, whether you know her story or not.

THE RESTAURANT
IN FISMES WHERE
I SAID I COULD
LIVE IN FRANCE

In the restaurant in Fismes I said *I could live in France*, giving it a sacred dimension.

We ate there twice, *The Golden Door*, some name like that. I'll never forget the food: grapefruit and basil sorbet, a whitefish swimming in my mouth as if it was still in the sea, the pistachio soufflé. Helena seemed happy I'd said I could live in France, like she'd won a game of cards.

After dinner we walked through Fismes—a village in the north, a little grimy, at odds with the magnificent restaurant—for we were always on the lookout for the place we might live, for the place where we could *fall off the face of the earth*. Helena and I were progressing away from the state in which I must say something after she said something or she must say something after I say something, about to enter the place in our relationship in which nothing might be said and yet a great deal communicated. My own views that night were in flux as I walked through Fismes,



I couldn't wait to get back to our hotel to write down what I was thinking. Fisme—pronounced FEEEM—is where I felt that I might be able to live in France, though it might have been in the village to which we would eventually return and meet once again with Jean-Claude and Teradact and the others, since I never lived in Fisme. Fisme's too close to Lille, possibly the ugliest city in Europe.

—Why does anyone love anyone? Is love that quality between two people in which one is listening to the other only in the hopes of being listened to. AND in that listening there is an understanding AND in that understanding one's able to see, however briefly, who one really is; and in that seeing is something that must be accepted just as it is, without it being altered in any way...

—or—or or is it the desire to be beautiful to one other person in particular but to others as well, to be beautiful primarily to myself, to be correct with Helena first as a test of what might be considered correct for the rest—Jean-Claude, Simone, Robaire, Antonio, Christiana and, most certainly Teradact who has evolved into something of an ideal—so that I might live peacefully without being consumed by any worry about how I am looking to myself or to others...

{Well, they're just notes but notes can add up to something someday.}

It's believable now as it wasn't then, that it was in Fisme I said to Helena, *if I was to live in France it would be like living my life all over again*. In any case, it's in the village we would eventually settle in that I first meet the fabulous Teradact.

INTRODUCING
TERADACT, THE KING I worshipped Teradact from the beginning, from the moment I first saw him in the village. Not enough can be said of his improbable and fantastic movement, each step of which was approached with the possibility that it would be his last and that his last step would find him *falling off the face of the earth*.

How's it possible that a man could manage to look like he'd just been born, having been born in the previous century? It's said that Teradact never had a child and so remained one, that not having children may be more bittersweet than having them, though Teradact did have the dogs, the spaniels, one right after another right up to the day he died. He also had Madame Teradact for whom he did everything, serving her for eighty years, forbidding her any work in which she might be forced to face a world more unpleasant than the one in which she lived (it is said that at the end of her life Madame Teradact did not know how to operate the washing machine or pay a bill and spent her time watching tv, only those programs which Teradact himself sanctioned, travel shows mostly, an occasional movie, a western or a mystery).

Every morning other than Monday, Teradact descends the fifteen stone steps from the front door of his home at the very top of the village (on the same little lane as the petit maison and Jean-Claude)—takes the next six, sometimes seven steps to the Peugeot, ignites the Peugeot, no small matter considering the unsteadiness of his extremities, the quaint smallness of the car's key and the tiny aperture the key must negotiate—and drives the steep and narrow road from the top of the village down the hill for bread, a caronne and a baguette.

I've watched Teradact many times on his pilgrimage, from beginning to end, taking up the better part of my day watching. Teradact holds the bread in the crook of his left arm, the good arm that is, closes the door of the boulangerie, after exchanging a minimum of two and a maximum of eight words with the blonde behind the counter, the proprietor, a

woman who is estimated to be anywhere from one-half to one-quarter Teradact's age and who has a locally noted and demonstrable preference for men much younger than herself, walks to the Peugeot to ascend the hill to his home.

Once up the hill and parked, Teradact removes himself from the car with great effort but not before re-setting the handbrake, aware that the parked cars of less attentive drivers have careened driver-less to the bottom of the village more than once for lack of a final inspection of the handbrake.

Restoring the round caronne and the jaunty baguette to the crook of his left arm, Teradact extracts himself from the car, leaning on the cane whose point must find the firmest ground (there have, Jean-Claude says, been missteps and Teradact left stranded, nearer death than such a great man should be, by the side of his car, prone and with soggy bread. He allows for no assistance other than that of Thierry, the drunk who lives alone in the house across the lane).

When at long last upright, Teradact takes the smallest possible human step to the left and lifts his cane into a position in which it might close the car door with the slightest push. He breathes deeply, assessing the next stage of his journey, the six or seven steps from the car to the ascending and final fifteen steps to the front door of his village, the thrusting of the key into the lock of the door, the hand on doorknob, the removal of key from lock, and the entry into the kitchen where two wood carving blocks, and Madame Teradact, await the bread.

Teradact is, however, not yet at his arrival space.

I must watch carefully, Teradact moves only the tiniest bit, one bread crumb of movement after another, for from the side of the garage closest to the corner of the wall of villa, where the initial step ascending to the villa begins, to the wall's absolute corner where the corner turns away so that it is properly described as the other side of the corner, a corner that cannot quite hide a body (as some turned corners can) even a body as slight as Teradact's. For even now he has not quite turned the corner and become unseen.

Teradact is not unlike a piece of ice melting in cold water; his countenance dissolves with impeccable slowness, his being, its material substance, progressing toward the corner under observation, the said corner, the

distance toward which Teradact takes each step, closer to not only the corner's far side but the first ascending step to his villa.

Fifteen steps loom—I've counted them from where I could not be seen—from the corner around which Teradact now peers as he moves forward and upward, although one watching must be satisfied by the assumption that once around the corner Teradact will successfully climb the fifteen steps, bread under his arm, for Teradact would never believe he was being watched, and deplores assistance.

It is known to those in the village who care to know, though I am not one of them, having never witnessed the actual event, that Madame Teradact, a great beauty, two years older than Teradact himself and not yet legally blind, is waiting every morning just inside the door for Teradact to return with the bread.

INTRODUCING TERADACT, THE KING

GENEALOGY, PARIS, AND ME Teradact never hoped to be from Paris, he had no choice.

Born near the Bois de Boulogne, I can't imagine his parents. They must have been small, there are lots of smaller people in Paris. I know he had fun as a kid but couldn't wait to leave, not liking the way people lived. That's what I know, otherwise information about Teradact is highly controlled. Someone whispered he'd represented a family company that made photographic supplies, that he sold their stuff. Now when he goes to Paris only the food brings him back, he takes pride in knowing shops and restaurants no one else knows, having them to himself before others find them. He's antique, faithful to his wife, likes to read Pascal and drink good wine. He can't imagine his parents either.



He met his wife in The 11th arrondissement, it's where he became a man. They lived in 11th all those years, he told Jean-Claude who told me. Mrs. Teradact disagrees not long before her death, saying they'd lived not in

the 11th but in the 20th, in the far east. *It was not so expensive there*, she said. She always spoke so softly

It's clear from the beginning—knowing the feeling of being in a place like Paris where I'm not wanted and don't belong because I'm not wanted, of being underground even when walking surface streets—that the village puts person before place. My memories of Paris deflate me, like some sort of syrup had been poured over the streets centuries ago and all I'm destined to see is preordained by dead people better than me. In Paris, sight is purely physical and I have trouble with time. I've never been so lost in my life, so lost there once late at night that I'd come around a street corner and seen THE PANTHEON all lit up, seeing all of a sudden how hard it is to be a real human being, that a human being is only a body wandering around in the hope of having something to see.

VILLAGE LIFE, A
FIRST FEW MEMORIES

ONCE WE FIND THE VILLAGE and settle into the petit maison, I sit on the terrace and listen to the women talking in the square in the mornings, learning the sound of Simone's voice and Monica, and Marionette the old lady who owns the land where the lambs live. I listen without knowing what they're saying, writing about the first morning we stayed in the village and walked out past the square and into the countryside, in one of the yellow notebooks I've bought in Clermont-Ferrand. Helena wants to walk, Walk, walk, walk once we find the village. Walking's like life to her. I walk much less, watch for Teradact, wondering what Paris meant to him when he lived there so long ago, what it means to him now that he's given up on being young.

It rained the first night. By morning the village smelled like a boulder in a cold river.

At first light, we walked the "D" road toward Gourdon and Olloix, walking in the middle of the road.

How quickly you walked ahead of me, Helena! I watched you bend to pick up apples, cherries and nuts that had fallen from trees by the side of the road until you disappeared onto the road that runs toward Olloix, near the wooden shack where the tail of the animal was pinned to the door with a piece of white paper on which a note was written announcing the *first kill of the season*. You looked through the window, you said you saw rifles, jackets on wooden hooks, a card table, two bottles of Jack Daniels.

I thought maybe we could break in, sniff around, maybe take a souvenir. You talked me out of it and we kept walking further and further out until we reached the lambs. I fell in love with the lambs and stayed behind to watch them in the field, you kept walking until you disappeared.

I waited for you beside the field of lambs. An hour passed and then you came. You'd taken off your jacket, stored the fruit and nuts you'd found in it and wrapped the jacket around your waist.

We walked back toward the village, together.

Suddenly you stopped walking and said, *what's that sound?* hearing something new in the air. I heard it too, but after you.

It sounds like a large bird flying away from a tree or a small bird hovering above an open blossom — whose wings are made of water and stone, the lightest possible heaviness and the heaviest possible lightness, thin pieces of silver wire through which a heart must continually pass to pump blood, somewhere behind a tall row of junipers at the edge of the village.

We stopped and listened, we could hear all the way to Issoire, 15 kilometres away. I said, *we've out-listened the music.* It was time to stop, so we walked back toward the village, the castle and the church coming closer and closer as though they were walking toward us.

It would be a year before Helena and I knew what the music was, who was making it, where it was coming from.

We'd only know if we returned to the village.

DECISION POINTS,
A SPEECH BY
HELENA, AND
MARCEL DUCHAMP

Might flip a coin—to go or not to go—Helena: to France or not. Two out of three, three of five, six of ten, fifty-one of one hundred. There may be no

end, for the result I foresee changes moment by moment and the answer is the misfortune of the question, as the Frenchman said.

I'll go. No I won't go. If I go, you lead and I'll follow.

No, I don't have the time to go. No, I don't have the money.

Yes, I have to go.

We should go together, we shouldn't, we should go where we shouldn't.

We have to go. I have to go with you and you with me.

Why stay in America if I am in France, why go to France if I am in America?

I'll never go back to America, never. I'll never own a car again, why own a car, you have to be stupid to own a car. Should I go back to America, I'll write a book about living there without a car, a best-seller.

It's simplest to leave everything, the house, the car, the furniture, my golf clubs, my yellow notebook, my credit card, pots and pans. I am French or I am not, either *jus soli* or *jus sanguinis*, of soil and blood.

If I go to France, no more entrecote and frites, no more lemon tarts in rue Buci or rue Moufflard, no more black coffee and carafes of white wine, no more Gauloises cigarettes. Following is something I must go through with, I must no longer mind following.

It's absurd to think I could live here, not knowing the language in the least, in a place turned as inward as this. Everyone here—Teradact, Jean-Claude among them—lives like they're living behind stones. The village seems like a tomb in the hour before and after noon and from darkness on...

...I've made a copy of the speech Helena made in the hotel room in Rouen. The place is a dump, a purple room with high ceilings and walls painted over so many times they're sagging like an old man's face. It's a drug dealer's room, perfect for not worrying whether or not you'll wake up in the morning:

There is meaning in what happened that can't be misplaced by either of us—the meaning of what it means to be civilized. To be civilized does not only mean to be able to read and write and to appreciate reading and writing. It means to communicate and to appreciate, ie. to value communication. It means to listen, to have humility enough to actually listen and, once listening, to respond accordingly with love and with truth. That's civilized. You can read and write all the poems you want, look at all the pictures and sculptures, visit museums and galleries ad nauseum, but none of it will ever make you a better person, will contribute one bit to the well-being of the world if you aren't listening. To be civilized is to listen and to listen is to tolerate and to tolerate others is to be civilized.

The words sound like music, deserve to be in a composer's hands.

VISITING
DUCHAMP

Doesn't matter if it's my idea or Helena's, when inspiration's everything the weather's always fine: to visit the birthplace of Marcel Duchamp in Blainville, Normandy, not far from Rouen. I think it's my idea, that I talked her into something for once, as I was interested in Duchamp, the great artist. I'd over-thought Duchamp for years, particularly "*The Readymades*," as a man to art as Einstein is to physics, though I'd met a woman in New York who knew him and said he lived *like a dog* there, going to his studio every day and working very hard, having very little money and telling everyone he'd given up his art.

Blainville's not on any main road. We went out of our way, arriving at a reasonable hour. Driving to the center and not finding memorialization of Duchamp, perhaps the most crucial artist of the century and a member of a family of well-known artists, I thought I'd come to wrong place, or that the lack of memorialization was a purposeful manipulation, a Duchampian trick, that there might be another Blainville, village names in France often being repeated from region to region.

I parked the car and walked into a café in the center of town, immediately encountering four or five people and questioning each about the "*family Duchamp*" as they ate French fries and drank their beer.

"*Duchamp, Duchamp*," they replied, shaking their heads. "*No, no, nothing*," each of them said, two men and two women of the place and of an age when they might have known Duchamp and his work, if not that Duchamp was born in Blainville, then at least that he and his father, brother, and sister were artists of stature.

It didn't occur to me until much later, far away from Duchamp's birthplace, that visiting the cemetery of Blainville might have been a good thing to do, but we hadn't, we moved on. Why hadn't I thought of this in the case of Duchamp, a man of whom it was said that his greatest work of art was how he used his time?

THE INTERNAL RETURN TO
THE VILLAGE, WALKING TO THE
RIVER ALMOST EVERY NIGHT,
AND MEMORIES OF MONIQUE

My status is of a possible traveler, a man who's been where he's thinking of going and is thinking of going back to where he's been to see if he can be there again, before everything changes and he has nothing and no one to follow.

It's not entirely clear whether I should or shouldn't return to the village. I only have ordinary ideas these days, spend most of my time picking apart the present and looking for little clues there—built as they are on the past—to see how they might point to a future.

To go to the village again, to return to the scene where my quest had taken place and had, at best, been inconclusive and at worst failed, seems like such a gamble. There's the great possibility that I'd lose everything I have here, that in my absence everything might change at home, that I'd forfeit whatever place I currently enjoy or give my life away completely to Helena, who continues to live with such incredible certainty.

So many good things happened in Montaignut, the little village of accident and choice, though I did very little of substance there other than walking out to the terrace almost every day and writing in the yellow notebook. The village was good to me; the place led me to believe that it might be possible to sit in a room all by myself for at least one hour, quietly, as Pascal had advised.

If I go to France again, it's possible I'll go as someone new, rename myself, or pretend not to be who I am. I won't smoke or eat red meat or all that cheese and bread. *Three dots can make a face*, Pablo Picasso said, one of the few things he said that lacks pretension.

I walk downhill from the petit maison to the river each night, a habit I substitute for cigarettes. I have the river to myself, stand beside the dark water—like a black cat who knows everything's spooked by it—feeling that my life's both behind and in front of me, I stand by myself beside the river that took Monique, noting the shallows, the relative smallness of the river itself, the glints of light that show on the dark surface of the water.

Monique had to try very hard to die in this river, submerge with real purpose, not simply trusting the force of the river itself but forcing Her Self downward and trusting the desire for death completely, seeing the river as going somewhere she wanted to go.

She's long gone, the restaurant's closed, and all the nice little things she did for Helena and I—letting us eat a meal and pay later, the gifts of pates and terrines, the glasses of wine she never charged us for—are memory. Memory's as close to Monique I can come, a little reward.

Her girl friend did her in. She was fat and looked like a man, everything changed when she took over the kitchen as chef. They'd sit at a table in the middle of the room like they were the customers—Monique and her girlfriend/employee/lover—and smoke cigarette after cigarette. They may have been taking drugs. Whatever, it became a problem, neither of them made much of an effort. The fat woman sighed whenever anyone came into the restaurant, like it was an inconvenience, and Monique got dark circles under her eyes. *Big problem*, Jean-Claude said, *big big problem*, no one in the village has dinner there

I should have said to her, *Monique, DO NOT associate with anyone incapable of introspection*, I'd had the experience of doing business with a person so empty I felt like I was with no one when I was with him. Finally, not able to go on anymore with what was not a relationship, I ended it as quickly as I possibly could.

Now I watch the river closely and see it two ways, as abstraction and reality. The river's personal until it passes the mill, then it becomes just an idea, joining the larger river. Standing beside the river the lights of the village sparkle on top of the water, reflected in the window of Monique's restaurant, image and abstraction., I can see the river flowing but it is a reflection, image and abstraction of image <::::::::::::::::::::::::::::::::::>
When I think of Monique, I see her in the river as if she's drowning all over again, abstract, taking herself away. Her restaurant's empty.

The river's more like me than Helena. Helena's a hill and trees and grass. Together we cover the earth and look good in graveyards.

GRAVEYARD JOKE Helena looks good walking around the old stones—walking right up to them and reading them—and I look good making up stories for them.

We don't know the dead, that makes it more fun, we can be with them for an hour if it's nice outside. I like graves that have no flowers or ribbons, where there's nothing but the stone itself and maybe a photograph of the person's face behind a glass frame. Have I ever known anyone better than I know Mathilde Beufalleuf? I stay at her grave for an hour, making her life up. It's something Helena and I do together, we're full of ourselves, we make jokes about dead people and god. *No matter what time it is when I'm in a cemetery, I feel like I should have brought a flashlight. Or that I don't*

believe in God until there's an emergency, and so forth. A graveyard brings out good things between Helena and I, we're grateful, appreciate the atmosphere and the architecture, the way families are brought together @////////html.com.

Walking down the big green stony hill behind the village of Olloix, Helena asks if I'd like to see the church.

Perhaps we can have a meditation there, I say hopefully. I like to meditate now in the small empty churches of the Auvergne.

The church of Olloix was padlocked and we can't get in. If a church is padlocked in the Auvergne it's a sign of some fundamental problem with the village itself.

With no alternative other than walking back in the direction from which we came, we walk toward the Olloix cimiterie.

Would you like to see it? Helena asks. *I thought you'd never ask,* I say, and we walk through little Olloix's graveyard, in the shadow of the padlocked church, stopping before almost every grave to read the names of the deceased and the dates. Even in the day, I feel like I need a flashlight.

I ask Helena, *why we like to walk through graveyards?*
She says, *because everyone's so happy to see us.*

MY BACKPACK I'd worn a backpack full of sentences I wanted to write as soon as I got back to the petite maison, but most of the words fell out of the pack and were lost. I ask Helena if she remembers any of them and she says there are two—that

If I was to see us together, I'd love us

We have to get there first before we know what it's like

—she said she picked them up when they fell out of the back pocket of my jeans, that I'd written them on a piece of white paper.

WALKING IS MEDITATION, Helena walks, she's the walker I'm not, she leads
A PRAYER OF MEANING by walking, walking leads her, she walks like
she knows where she's going. Though she does and does not know, she doesn't know I know she often doesn't know, but still I follow.

Walking from village to village, I often have to make my own way; by taking a real road and departing from it to cross a field, thinking the crossing of the field will yield a shorter distance, following the signs, the next sign in what has been a series of signs, is not there, does not confirm what I've been led to believe, does not state the name of the destination I'm seeking, is a different sign in a different color with a different style than the signs I'd followed, so that I come to believe I have been following the wrong signs and that I'm lost. From Antoingt to Maureghol, from Maureghol to Chalus, from Chalus to Solignant, from Solignant to Vodable—itself rising on a luminous mound of earth in which the chateau of the dauphines may be seen—I'm often out of step, two or three steps slower than Helena, or far ahead of her as she is often distracted by what has fallen—fruit and nuts from the trees, little stones that catch her eye—and stops walking.

In Maureghol I become empty for the first time, meditating in the little roman church in the perfectly square village. The church door looked locked, but Helena pushed it open. She really pushed the door, gave it a good shove. I was proud of myself for not telling her that she shouldn't. We had a good half hour of silence in there, sitting far enough apart so we couldn't hear the other breathing. I sat down in front, she toward the back, the minutes passed as everything else was passing, the inventory I took of the church itself, chunks of the fading blue frescoes of angels and prophets falling off the walls, the lacework covering the alter, the small triad of stained glass windows, the pre-occupation with Teradact. Toward the end of the meditation I was all there was, there was no church, no pews, there was only me. I realized the danger, pulled myself back, as if on a brink of becoming non-existent, and went back to being who I thought I was again.

I should pray every day, it wouldn't hurt me, certainly I'd have a better life if I prayed. Not that my life isn't good, I'm old enough now to know how good it is, though its goodness might be improved if I prayed—the urge to pray in France influenced by the feeling that my life is more mine here than it is there. I'm offended by almost everything in my own country, but delighted in France by almost everything that once offended me before I prayed.

I'm easily seduced by differences, especially opposites. The place opposes me, and I must learn to live in its opposition. That one cannot buy fresh bread at the boulangerie between Sunday noon and Tuesday morning, that



meat is better bought and much more cheaply on a late Sunday afternoon prior to the charcuterie's closure two consecutive days, there being good cuts of beef, pork, and lamb at half price or better, as presented by Yves Chevalier, the butcher who's left his wife for another woman.

In France I'm attracted to things that have no meaning, things whose meanings are hidden from me, particularly things that may have no meaning at all or that mean something other than what I think they mean as long as they're attractive?

MR. TIMIDITY I stop watching for Teradact, sleep later and later without thinking of rising until I know Helena's in the kitchen making coffee. I smell the orange she peels, hear her sigh as she sits on the side of my sofa bed or on the stone hearth of the fireplace, sipping her coffee.

By not watching, by not taking the steps up to Teradact's front door and knocking, I'm defined by what I couldn't do. I couldn't approach Teradact, I wouldn't have known what to say, or he to me in all likelihood, and so I re-play many of the times in my life I've gone forward and been disappointed, not finding what I'd sought or finding something so different it was as if I'd not searched at all.

I'll always regret not going up Teradact's stairs and knocking on the door, introducing myself as his neighbor when I had the chance. My regret reigns supreme, I'll never get over it, not even Teradact's death could make it better. In fact it makes it worse! I'm only consoled by thinking that he would certainly have been very different from the man I imagined and therefore a disappointment.

Teradact's too old to replace the light bulbs in his house, Jean-Claude says, too proud to ask for help from Thierry, who Teradact trusts for some reason and who would do anything for the old guy. Accordingly, Teradact lives without proper light, other than the floor lamps upstairs in the bedroom and downstairs in the dining room.

Simone swears it was only last summer, in the very last of the warm nights when certain insects rub their legs together to make a ruckus before they die, that Teradact chinked, with wet concrete, the spaces between the stones of his villa where he believed the insects lodged, in

the hope that it would stop the worrisome late summer chorus of ceramic clicking that kept he and his wife awake. Simone insists she saw Teradact climbing up and down a tall wooden ladder with a small bucket of cement and a trowel, and her story's no more absurd than Helena and I becoming lost in a small village yesterday, somewhere not far from Brioude.

LOST AND ASHAMED We drive toward the village, seeing the spire
of the church from a great distance, arrive near
its entrance, waving to the old fat man wearing suspenders and a beret
tending vegetables in the front yard of what we presume is his home,
very near the ancient arch signifying entry to the village. While he hadn't
returned the greeting he should have been giving us, we proceeded, park-
ing the car near the arch.

It took little time to find and inspect the church and the chateau, then to wander into the square, deserted, as it was near noon, to eat the bread, cheese and apples we'd packed and drink our water near the fountain.

Thinking we'd toured the whole village, we agreed to make our way back to the car but did not, becoming lost in the narrow lanes of the village, losing even the church steeple and chateau. The village pressed us between old buildings, and we were unable to see what was right in front of us. Perhaps the old man we'd passed could help us...but where was that man, or his house we'd passed only moments ago?

I've never been one who can just stop, I have to go in circles and see for myself that I'm going in circles before I trust another to tell me I am. Helena shares this with me. And so we walked around the tiny village for almost an hour, finding our way back to our car at last, only by accident.

Helena reasoned the square must be in or near the center of the village, that radiating in any direction from the square would bring us toward some resolution, and I followed her, noting several mis-directions—the square itself re-emerges from different angles more than once—until at last I saw the ancient arch denoting the village entrance and we walked to our car and drove Northwest.

Overwrought, we stopped in Solignat at a small bar near the middle of town and drank two beers—drinking's something we could succeed at, to atone for our failure—then walked around that sweet little village for

about ten minutes. Helena took some pictures and I wrote in the yellow notebook while I sat waiting for her in the car:

The Red Door of Solignant

There's no reason for the door to have made the impression it made, for it was only a small, if vividly colored, door that hung on an old stone hut in the square of the village.

Of the village itself, there is little to recommend. The door of which I write is only modestly photographable, has a mildly intriguing symmetry, a soft grace that has caused a select few of us to consider it with some curiosity, as if the door exists only to prompt questions from a discerning visitor; otherwise the door is unlikely to be thought of as an image with any real purpose.

When the door does catch one's eye, some questions arise: what is the purpose of the door? If there is something behind the door, what is it? Who placed the padlock on the hasp, and who has the key?

About the color of the door there is some discussion. Some believe it to be blue, others red. Red or blue, blue or red, the controversy continues among those who've seen the door. Red seems to be the truth, the door is painted red and not blue as some say and continue to maintain. It's possible that the door has been repainted over the years, from blue to red and from red to blue, so that those who maintain the door is blue have seen the door when the door was indeed blue, and those who swear it is red have seen a red door.

What's behind the door? Behind the door are all the words to this story in exactly the order they will appear once the story is written.

LANGUAGE Not speaking the language, I walk around in
AND SILENCE the silences of not knowing who I am. I keep to

myself in ways I never have, semi-confiding only in Jean-Claude who accepts me and of whom I could ask, *should I live in this village, should I stay here for awhile?* I find new freedom in not knowing the language, allow things to be translated for me.

Not one of my friends in the village seem to mind the way I'm thinking or acting, which is new to me. They never see me for the stranger that I am. Each of them comes forward to tell me what I can't understand—and would never know—except Teradact, who remains out of reach.

THE BLIND MAN I At the party to celebrate the new paintings of
NEVER SEE AGAIN Antonio_____, I meet the blind man. He'd
been a guide at a lake in the mountains. Both his eyes are completely
open and sparkle so brightly they look like they are seeing.

His last official duty is to escort President Mitterand on a tour of the
countryside and the lake. It's a hot August day and a high honor, not just
anyone's chosen. He was the CHOSEN ONE, but I can't remember his
name. *I'm sorry, tell me your name again, please monsieur.*

He says he knows the moment he became blind, that showing the
President the lake he looked too many times and for too long at the
water—the intensity of the light was magnified by the water and caused
his blindness. I suppose it's possible, he doesn't seem the type to look
for sympathy, he looks like a pretty competent guy, with big hands. And
Mitterand's never mentioned again.

I couldn't ask why he hadn't worn sunglasses, taken precautions he
should have taken to protect himself, having worked on the lake most
of his life. He must have known the danger. I suppose it's pretty new
information, how sensitive the skin and organs are to the sun, how much
radioactivity and other stuff is in the air, even in rural France. He looked
at me like I shouldn't ask, but that might have been just the way his glass
eyes looked.

When he spoke I could see right through him, sunlight and water poured
in and out of him. I suddenly knew I was in my right place, a place where
anything could happen where a blind man could talk so brilliantly and
look at a painting as if he could see. I felt I belonged in France for the first
time. And all I think to ask, *did he know of a good restaurant in the region?*

The restaurant at Lac Chambron is worth the drive, he says. He knows the
owner. The chef did things the right way, the menu changed every day,
there were some specialties, *everything is fresh.* He wanted to write the
name of the place and the chef's name on a piece of paper for me, and
wandered off to find a pencil or a pen. I've never seen him since.

As I moved through the old stone house like I wasn't there, the party hap-
pened around me — among faces that did and didn't look familiar. The
pleasures of hand-rolled cigarettes were being explored, the cigarette
tips making fiery yellow finger-prints in the dark. A small group gathered

B O O K T H R E E

Nature has set us so well in the center, that if we change one side in the balance, we change the other also. This makes me believe that the springs in our brain are so adjusted that he who touches one touches also its contrary.

Pascal, *Pensees*

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