

The Paris End

Always go too far, because that's where you'll find the truth.

As a student obsessed with everything French, Camus' words swept me away on a narcotic tide as I rode the school bus, my head buried in *L'Etranger*. Meursault was as estranged from others as they were from him, and I was from the Herefords grazing the New England hills flowing past the window.

I imagined instead sitting on the banks of the Seine sipping Coffee, reading Sartre, de Beauvoir, listening to Jacques Brel's voice, notched down low, singing *Ne me quitte pas*.

I finally made it to Paris one autumn in the mid-seventies. I was twenty-two. My flared cord pants dragged in the mud at Versailles. The opulence of the palace discomforted me. My thin coat didn't keep me warm. Nothing did.

Clouds lowered themselves resolutely and didn't lift for nine months over my tiny Parisian room overlooking two cemeteries each gone wild with neglect. I was cooking Rise-a-Riso for dinner in a coffeemaker and watching old episodes of *Skippy* on TV.

I don't remember the bread, the cheese, the wine – just the silence that fell over me as heavily as a pall of sweet Gauloise smoke whenever I was confronted with the speed at which people spoke the language I'd so loved on the page.

My tongue settled on the floor of my mouth like a mute animal. Dreams wrestled my sleep. French-speaking ghosts agitated the wind. I thought I might never speak again. I became a stranger to myself. In the end, I fled.

Twenty years later, I moved into a house
on a dirt-cheap, ramshackle road described
by a desperate real estate agent as *the Paris end* of the street.
It was the house of my new love - the much-adored
and much-scorned 'Mayor' of *the Paris End*
inclusive of everyone, the conduit of information
and connection, possessing the skill of sewing
disparate people together in all sorts of patterns.

One evening recently, we hurried south along the Paris End,
pushed open an old green iron gate, ducked under red
Chinese lanterns strung from bone-white birch branches
along the path to our neighbours' little grey weatherboard
cottage. We kicked off our shoes and rang the bell.

Without waiting for a response, we padded through
a room sunk in shadow where firelight flickered
over bookcases, old red Persian rugs, a blue jug overflowing
with yellow gum blossoms like little feathery lamps in the dim.

Warm aromas and scraps of music drew through
a stream of voices, the clink of cutlery on china plates.
We stepped down into a room painted deep crimson.
In the soft light of candles on the old rosewood table,
our neighbours' upturned and welcoming faces glowed.

Deprecating humour bubbled up, something
flickered, then strengthened: an encounter took place.
The mysteries at its heart dismantled our pasts:
our thoughts of work and trouble were disturbed, disrupted.
Like prisoners singing to each other before execution,
the humour sizzling around the room recognised Sartre's
idea of the absurdity of existence: *chance, death, the irreducible
pluralism of life and of truth, the unintelligibility of the real.*

All the rest fell away when we gathered together
as we did that evening, when our voices filled the room
and we rolled laughter across the table from one to the other.

In a long conversation, we illuminated the story of our lives.
We rested between notes, dipped a spoon into thick folds of cream,
tasted the freshly baked pear soaked in sweet juice
resting on a bed of puff pastry and dusted with sugar.

We shared a laugh at each other's expense in that peculiar
language of friends, its verbs acerbic, always deprecating
but undershot with warmth. Shouting over the top
of each other, we drank while lifting a child onto a lap,
our laughter becoming more highly pitched with each round.

Amid the mayhem, my love quietly smiled
at me from across the table in that enigmatic way he has,
as though he possesses the best secret anyone could hold –
and no one will ever know what it is.

I savoured the last of the glossy pear, the golden pastry,
the warmth from the fire, the thrum of flowing conversation.
We were each alone in our skin, but around that table,
contained within those crimson walls in the Paris End,
the hum of generous human connection strummed me,
the sense of *being known*, the sense of coming home.