

The Poem  
Has  
Reasons:

A Story  
of  
Far Love



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“The heart has reasons that Reason doesn’t know.”

Pascal

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## I. Lives and Reasons

### Far Love —*Amor de Lonh*

*Lanquan li jorn son lonc en mai ...*

When the days are long in May,  
bird song from far away  
enchants me.

When I'm gone  
from there, I remember a far love,  
and grow sick with longing.  
No song, no hawthorn flower  
consoles me—it's like frozen winter.

Jaufre Rudel of Blaye composed this song about a far love—his greatest joy and sorrow, his sole reason for singing. It is said that the woman he loved was the Countess of Tripoli, a distant city whose rulers were Christian (no French knight's Lady should be pagan!). The story tells how the troubadour, who had often heard that the Countess was beautiful and full of qualities, decided not just to sing about her, but to enlist in a Crusade and board a ship bound for her Near Eastern home.

... Oh to be a pilgrim  
with staff and satchel,  
seen by her lovely eyes.

On the ship, he became ill and arrived in Tripoli dying. Messengers rushed to tell the Countess who, taking up her role in the story, rushed to the crusader's side. Jaufre was unconscious. She embraced him. He woke and knew the embrace had fulfilled his deepest longings; he could not survive it. He died in the Countess' arms, and was buried in great pomp. His Lady entered a convent where she devoted the rest of her life to a knight she had seen once and a God she had never seen at all.

## Map of France I

The town of Blaye lies in Haute Gironde, “historic boundary between the language of *Oïl* in the North and *Oc* in the South.” According to the *Blue Guide to Southwest France* (2003), its attractions include the ruined château of Jaufrè Rudel, “author of *Amours lointains* [who] left for Tripoli in 1147 in pursuit of his beloved Melissande, only to expire in her arms.”

No *Amours lointains* was written by Jaufrè or anyone else. Knowingly or not, the guidebook writer transmits a fiction invented seven hundred years ago in Jaufrè’s *vida* and adapted in Edmond Rostand’s nineteenth-century play, “*La Princesse Lointaine*.” Jaufrè’s earliest listeners wondered who his “far love” might be. They enjoyed the idea that it might not be a living woman at all, but the Virgin Mary, or even God. Later listeners did not enjoy wondering, so after Jaufrè’s death they made up the story about the Countess of Tripoli.

I am familiar with several places described in the *Blue Guide*, but have never visited Blaye to visit Jaufrè’s historical remains. I have chosen to love him *de lonh*, from afar, at a few removes from history. Like the author of his *vida*, I have made his poems and those of others including myself into stories, not histories, of how some poems came to be written. I will tell how, when a near love of mine became a far one, he left me with poems, and how my earliest far love drew me to Southwest France, to Dante, and to Occitan troubadours.

## A Note on Occitan

Today the *Blue Guide’s* “boundary between the language of *Oïl* in the North and *Oc* in the South” is invisible and inaudible. Nowhere in North or South are travelers likely to hear the language of *Oc* unless they seek it out. Since the time of King Francis and his 1539 Edict of Villers-Coteret, the language of *Oïl* (successor to *Oïl*) has been France’s sole official

language. But when the troubadours flourished, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, France was a kingdom of loosely knit regions whose princes were often more powerful than the King. Vernacular speech in some of those regions was quite distinct from that of the King's subjects in Ile de France. People of Poitiers, for example, did not speak like people of Troyes. Their songs differed as much as lark songs from thrush songs, which is why the first troubadour, Duke Guilhem IX of Poitiers, wrote that the birds were singing *chascus en lor lati*, each in his Latin dialect, though of course they were all singing of love.

Until recently, the troubadours' language and its modern descendant were referred to as "Provençal," but Provence is only one region in Occitania, and Provençal only one of its main dialects (the others are Gascon, Limousin, and Languedocien).

[Visit Occitan.](#)

Those who speak, sing, write, and advocate the language tend to call it Occitan, and that is the term I use in this book.

### **Reasons for Reasons**

Years ago, when I was writing poems even more rarely than I write them today, I decided to try making a sestina. I had not read many of them and had no particular theme in mind. My only goal was to obey the labyrinthine rules for repeated end-words. The result didn't satisfy me so I put it away. Later when I found it I could only try to imagine the person who might have produced such a strange poem, and I wrote this story about him.

## Six Words and Several Flowers

Of the works of the troubadour Gaucelm Laudet only two have come down to us: a sestina and the fragment of a love canso.

It is said that the first object of Gaucelm's love was Lady N and that this noblewoman's virtues were tarnished by False Pride which made her cold to his affection. She never answered his messages or songs. She averted her eyes when he came into the room. Venting his despair, he wrote:

Winds from strange places  
fetch day's rain.  
Black flints  
make the rock  
smart.

He never finished the canso. Before he'd written its closing lines, he glimpsed one of N's companions, Lady L, and guessed from her smiling appearance that she would not refuse him. In fact, Poet and Lady took up an exchange of messages and songs that delighted them both.

Meanwhile, the opening of the canso was seen by a painter who slept in Gaucelm's rooms on nights when he found them unoccupied. Admiring the achingly opaque verses, he decided to illustrate them in a drawing.



He drew a grey star. At its center a black line merged into lighter shades near the edges. From two points, angling in opposed diagonals toward the lower corners, he drew broken lines resembling rain, each “drop” shaped like entwined initials.

The broken lines fell toward a lower, flower-like figure, as if to straddle or inscribe it between two compass points. This figure, like the star, had a shaded center and light sides, but was more like a starfish than a star, the outlines curved instead of angular. In spaces to the right and left, wavy lines in shades of blue suggested the East and West coastlines of some long continent, or the embodiments of winds.

The artist finished his drawing, but as it was useless to him, the illustration of an incomplete poem, he left it in Gaucelm’s room. Later, word came that the Count of Limoges

needed artisans to decorate a chapel. In quest of this or some other commission, the painter quitted Gaucelm's region, never to return.

It happened that Gaucelm had an irritable landlord, Truc the apothecary. Prowling one day in the poet's empty rooms, he came across the drawing and the lines that had inspired it. Thinking image and poem were by the same person, he deduced that Gaucelm must be ill from deflected black bile. The truth is that, at the very moment he drew this grim conclusion, Gaucelm and Lady L were amusing themselves in a field of lavender.

The druggist knew a local Abbot who sought some excuse to silence Gaucelm. Chivalric families, protectors of the Abbey, claimed his songs provoked their children to irreverence and rebellion. The druggist conveyed his diagnosis to the Abbot, who appointed Truc as medical officer in the Abbey. They agreed that the troubadour should be placed under official supervision.

One afternoon, as Gaucelm lay with Lady L on the fragrant hillside, armed knights seized him, carried him to the Abbey, and locked him in a cell—an unlit, stifling place reserved for those guilty of Sloth and Despair.

In a matter of days, the diet of undressed cabbage leaves, the droning of the monks' prayers, and the absence of his lady had so unhinged the poet that he lapsed into genuine despair, then into a restless, wordless trance. His poetic gifts were active only when he slept, and as good as lost to the world.

He remained in this despondency for over a year. The high-handed Abbot died and was replaced, but his successor never asked why Gaucelm had been confined to the dark cell. He just supposed the somnolent poet incapable of living outside it.

Two years after Gaucelm's arrest, Francis of Assisi, on pilgrimage, chose the Abbey as a stopping place. Hearing there was a poet confined in the cloister, he asked permission to

see him. A moment with Gaucelm suggested to Francis that the poet's muteness might be curable, though the treatment would have to be subtler than that of an ordinary melancholic. How could he coax song from the incoherent dream world?

Francis, a poet himself, specialized in sacred cansos but also knew the secular forms, one of which he used for Gaucelm's therapy. He asked the poet to sit beside him near a well in the cloister garden and asked if he knew the pattern of a sestina. Even half-awake, the patient recalled "The firm desire that enters ..." by a troubadour who, though dead for half a century, was still known throughout Occitania. Gaucelm named the six end-words of Arnaut Daniel's sestina: Enter, Nail, Soul, Stick, Uncle, Chamber.

"If you composed a sestina," asked Francis, "what would your end-words be?"

Gaucelm shut his eyes as if to consult figures on the linings of his eyelids.

*"Spider* would be one."

"and ... "

*"Vessel."*

"Good. Now four more."

*"Fathom. Cousin. Answer. I can't find ... "*

"Try," said the pilgrim.

*"Ravel,"* said the poet.

The sestina has a spiral form. Its lines do not rhyme but derive coherence from a revolving order of the end-words and from minute progressions in their meaning. Francis, hoping to startle art from sleep, told Gaucelm to concentrate on the words, letting them turn until they fell into sequence.

Near the well, thyme-flowers gave off spicy perfume. A swarm of bees was gathering nectar, and the sick poet stayed transfixed for hours. He saw bees turning in the

air as the line-ends turned in his ear and brain. The six words lengthened and contracted, becoming negative, positive, verbal, nominal, singular, plural. There was little stress in the work, only a slight acceleration of the pulse, monitored by Francis, Gaucelm's physician and friend. By the time the poem was finished, its composer had found the strength to sing "Ravel and Unravel:"

Deep in the folds of sleep, a vessel  
holds a soul, a sort of cousin,  
hidden, hoping never to be fathomed.  
He swims like the whiskers of a spider.  
First words, then other words, he ravel  
while I wait, intent, and want an answer.

I, because I weep for an answer,  
he, because he travels in vessels,  
wander in the kingdom of these ravel.  
No one, not a sister, not a cousin,  
measures. He is sligher than a spider  
and dark as seven hundred fathoms.

Should he ever stir, rise, fathom  
my intent, strange would his answer  
be, not plain. Any spider  
draws secret patterns on the vessel  
where no witless cook or cousin  
will unbend the ravel

and fantasies. The soul no sooner ravel  
them than wraps them in fathoms  
for the father of another cousin  
to decipher, sifting till an answer  
splits. Can a steward on the vessel  
read language rendered from a spider?

Do not seek to ramify the spider  
nor ask what is netted and ravelled  
in the sheet. (Veering with the vessel,  
a bug is balancing between the fathom  
and the plant.) Someone turns to answer  
in the words of a watchman to his cousin.

Once, an unknown uncle of my cousin  
wrote a Treatise on the Latin Spider

yet failed to frame an answer.  
Ravel means to ravel and unravel.  
The pain is delicate to fathom  
on a trip more rapid than the vessel.

Song, you sang no answer. What's a spider?  
And who ravel? Only tell my cousin  
where to seek our vessel in the fathoms.

Listeners agreed that the sestina made no sense, but that its sonorities showed high poetic ambition belying suspicions of Gaucelm's Sloth. Francis suggested that the poet be allowed to leave the Abbey for a court where an audience might appreciate his talents. On his release, Gaucelm sought the estate where Lady L was mistress. She took him in. She'd never believed accounts of his dementia. His spirits revived. He sent her countless cansos; she replied with witty messages. Occasionally, they escaped to a lavender hillside.

After ten contented years, the lady died giving birth to twin daughters, the poet's own. The infants were adopted by a wealthy lord, L's widower, and Gaucelm traveled to Umbria to look for Francis. By then, the Saint, too, had died after founding a community of brothers, who welcomed the poet with open arms.

They gave Gaucelm a plot of thyme and an acre of lavender. For the remainder of his days, he sang and gardened, gardened and sang. It is said that in hundreds of songs, now lost, he praised the flowery nectars and the scent of his lady's flesh, perfumes he hoped to breathe one day in Paradise.

### **More Reasons**

Through an unlikely chain of events, "Six Words and Several Flowers" appeared in a weekday issue of *The Village Voice*, which didn't normally publish fiction. The literary editor got a letter from one indignant reader saying there had never been a troubadour named

Gaucelm Laudet and that “Ravel and Unravel” could not possibly be a thirteenth century poem. The critic was right on both counts.

The prose in “Six Words” constitutes what was called, in Old Occitan, a *razo* (reason) purporting to explain the genesis of a given poem. In a number of manuscripts, the *razo* was juxtaposed to the *vida*, or fictional biography. The story of Jaufré Rudel and the Countess of Tripoli is a *vida* containing elements of *razo* about the genesis of the mysterious song, *Lanquan li jorn*.

“Six Words and Several Flowers,” a *razo* explaining “Ravel and Unravel,” could be followed by another *razo* explaining “Six Words,” beginning an infinite regression. Though I wrote the tale over twenty years ago, and can’t really know why I did, ignorance would not have stopped a medieval *razo*-writer.

Consider the following *razo*, inserted in a *vida* of Bernart de Ventadour. Bernart is perhaps the most admired of all troubadours, and “When I see the lark” his most admired song. Its melody lets the listener imagine a lark ascending and falling in ecstasy:

When I see the lark  
joyfully move its wings toward the sun  
until it forgets and lets itself fall  
as sweetness takes hold of its heart,  
Alas! how envious I am  
of any joyful man I see!  
It’s a wonder my heart  
doesn’t melt with desire.

Alas, I thought I knew so much  
about love ...

This is how the *razo* writer, who may or may not have heard the music, claims to explain the lark poem. He says the great troubadour frequented the Duchess of Normandy’s court, loved her, and sang many songs for her:

Bernart called her “Lark” because of a knight who loved her and whom she called Ray [*Rai*, sunlight] And one day the knight came to the Duchess’s room. The lady, seeing him, raised the hem of her cloak and put it on his neck, and let herself fall on the bed. And Bernart saw it all because one of the Countess’s servants had let him watch secretly. And he wrote a song about it:

When I see the lark ..

As this example shows, razos can be preposterous. Who would take this farcical account to explain Bernart’s song of ecstatic far love? There can be no authentic razo. The poem has reasons that Reason doesn’t know. But a razo may be a good story and keep the poem company as it goes in search of an audience.

### **The Razo Game**

In the year 1275, a middling Man of Letters makes his penurious way across Northern Italy, to Padua, say, where a Lord and Lady have commissioned him to compile a *chansonnier* (poetry anthology) for their library. In his luggage are several Occitan manuscripts, and in one of these he finds the following *tenso*, or debate poem, between a certain Bernart Arnaut and an otherwise unknown *trobairitz* (woman troubadour). He doesn’t know much about the two poets, who have been dead for fifty years or so, but he chooses the *tenso* because the woman’s name, Lombarda, and some place-names mentioned in the exchange, might interest his Italian hosts. Here is the *tenso* translated into English by Bruckner, Shepard and White in *Songs of the Women Troubadours*:

Bernart Arnaut:

I’d like to be a Lombard for Lady Lombarda;  
I’m not as pleased by Alamanda or Giscarda.  
She looks at me so kindly with her sweet eyes  
that she seems to love me, but too slowly,  
for she withholds from me sweet sight  
and pleasure  
and keeps her lovely smile

to herself; no one can move her.

Lord Jordan, if I leave you Allemagna,  
France, Poitou, Normandy and Brittany,  
surely you should leave me, uncontested,  
Lombardy, Livorno and Lomagna.  
And if you'll be my ally  
I'll be yours ten times more  
with your own lady, a stranger  
to all baseness.

Mirror of Worth,  
comfort is yours.  
Let the love in which you bind me  
not be broken for a villains' sake.

Lombarda:

I would like to have the name Bernarda,  
and to be called, for Lord Arnaut, Arnauda;  
and many thanks, my lord, for being so kind  
as to mention me with two great ladies.  
I want you to say  
without concealment  
which one pleases you the most,  
and in which mirror you are gazing.

For mirroring and absence so discord  
my chords that I can barely stay accorded,  
but, remembering what my name records,  
my thoughts accord in good accordance.  
Still, I wonder  
where you've put your heart;  
neither its house nor hut  
is to be seen. You keep it silent.

The Man of Letters thinks this poem will please his hosts, especially if he enhances it with a little story about the debaters. Who are they? Why, in an apparent love-plea, is Bernart Arnaut so concerned with an exchange of territories? Why does Lombarda reject his plea with such sarcasm and anger?

First, Bernart. The Man of Letters recognizes the name as that of several Dukes of Armagnac. He can safely make the troubadour a Duke of that Gascon region. But no, it

would be better to make him the Duke's younger brother, who still lacks the title, castle, and access to all the brandy he can drink. Such a man was likely to be more covetously scheming than the Duke himself, and more footloose in his courting habits.

As for Lombarda, she's obviously a poet, skilled in technicalities of rhyming and word-play. She knows how to interweave words of the same family (accord, record, etc.), a practice the Man of Letters admires. Where does she live? Not in Armagnac. The desire expressed by Bernart is the kind inspired by distance from the one desired. Perhaps, like the great Jaufre Rudel, he has fallen in love with a woman without seeing her (*sez la vezer*). But Bernart is no Jaufre, capable of loving a lady as far away as Tripoli. Let's put her in Toulouse, just a day or two on horseback from Armagnac. That way, the distance can be narrowed to create friction between them, then widened again to provoke the Lady's indignation—that will suffice by way of a story. And here it is, as it may be found on parchment in Manuscript H, Vatican Library, lat. 3207, (excerpt edited and translated by Bruckner, Shepard and White.)

Na Lombarda was a lady of Toulouse, gracious, fair, lovely in her person, and learned. She could compose well, and she made beautiful, amorous verses. Don Bernart Arnaut, brother of the Duke of Armagnac, heard of her goodness and merit and came to Toulouse to see her. He lived in great intimacy with her, sought her love, and was very much her friend. He wrote these verses about her, and sent them to her in her house. Then he mounted his horse, and, without seeing her, went away to his own country.

*I'd like to be a Lombard, etc.*

Na Lombarda was much amazed when she heard that Lord Bernart Arnaut had gone away without seeing her, and she sent him these verses:

*I would like to have the name Bernarda, etc.*

Or, the Man of Letters scenario is somewhat different. Let's say he doesn't invent the razo himself, but transcribes it from a performance in which he has heard one, two or three

singers play the roles of Lord, Lady, and Narrator, to animate a song composed some years before.

There is an analogy in the modern event called a “poetry reading.” Here, the poet typically inserts passages of prose between poems by way explanation, as a way of inviting listeners’ good will. Often the poet adds too much prose, and the audience becomes impatient and suspicious: If the poems require so much commentary, they may not be strong enough to stand on their own. “Stop giving Reasons,” we think. “Get on with the Poem.” There was a troubadour named Guillem de la Tor. According to his *vida*, “when he wanted to recite his songs he made his discussion of the explanation longer than the song itself.” When I read poems in front of an audience, I remember Guillem de la Tor, and try to avoid his mistake.

There’s also the issue of music. The *tenso*, at first, was probably sung by a man and a woman, or two men with voices in different registers, or even a single versatile performer. Compelling expression and tone would have sufficed to enliven the stanzas. Think of a soprano and baritone performing a duet like “Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better.” It works. We don’t need to know the characters’ identity or the song’s occasion. Some troubadour *chansonniers* include melodies, but many, like the manuscript containing this *tenso*, do not. Perhaps *razos* were written partly to compensate for the absence of music.

Be that as it may, I suggest you take a poem—your own or someone else’s—and tell the reason it came to be written. If you don’t know, invent a story. Or, invent the story first and then the poem it pretends to explain. All good variations of the Razo Game.

Later, I’ll tell you the Sestina Game.

## **And More Reasons**

Razos generally involve some love difficulty the poet was having when he or she wrote the poem. In this spirit, I would begin a razo for “Six Words” with a love problem I was having when I wrote it. But I forget who I was in love with in 1980. Not true. I remember a name. I just don’t remember the pain, just as, after labor, a woman remembers writhing, screaming for anaesthesia, but happily has no direct access to the agony she felt at the time. In order to have a sense memory of that love and its sufferings, I’d have to consult a journal I’d written then. But I didn’t keep a journal of loves, only a journal of dreams. One clue to the reason for “Six Words” is that it came in a period when the hours I spent dreaming were the most satisfying times of my life. Numb to possibilities of near love or far, I could say of myself what I said of Gaucelm: *His poetic gifts were active only when he slept, and as good as lost to the world.*

I wasn’t in prison like him, of course. I was keeping house, teaching students and earning a salary, but I was cloistered, unhopeful, attending mostly to dreams, and reading Borges. I had discovered *fausse érudition*, the literary genre that playfully falsifies learning for the sake of discovery rather than deception. In those days, the woods, especially Argentinian and Italian woods, were full of *fausse érudition*. That’s where I wanted to play and live rather than in Lancaster, Pennsylvania where I was keeping house, teaching students, and earning a salary. I set out on an indirect path to those woods.

## **Detour: Farewell to Fabiliaux**

The following tale was written somewhere North of the Oc-Oil boundary, in the tongue that became “the language of *oui*.” I’m not sure if it’s a story of far love or near.

### **Three Ladies Who Found a Phallus**

Walking from I don't know where  
to Mont Saint Michel, three ladies  
found two balls and one fat prick  
wrapped in a cloth with just the tip  
showing. Lady One noticed, snatched it,  
slipped it in her dress, I hear.  
Lady Two asked for a share.

"Finders keepers!" said her friend.  
"Are you crazy? It's half mine!  
Of course I have my rights.  
You know I'm your companion  
on this pilgrimage." "So what?  
I don't care. You'll get neither part  
nor whole!" Lady Two took this to heart.

She swore she'd have it—unless  
some judge should rule against her,  
but who? "Now that you mention it, nearby  
stands a house of nuns and holy women  
praying for the world. We'll ask the Abbess  
her opinion. She'll feel flattered."  
"Oil! Let's do it," said the other.

Though the title and first line announce three ladies, only two ever speak in the story. My version, for other than scholarly purposes, adds a few lines to account for the presence of a third lady.

Lady Three was shy and mute.  
She frowned, smiled, shook her head  
and nodded, showing she agreed  
with Ladies One and Two. They went  
along until they found the convent  
governed by an Abbess. When they asked  
for her, they heard she was at Mass.

"We'll wait," the Ladies said,  
and sat down in the audience room.  
Soon, the Abbess, the Prioress  
and Stewardess arrived. Up rose Lady  
One: "Thank God you've come. My friend

refuses ..." Lady Two burst in: "... to share something she has in her care!"

Then she told how they'd found it,  
and how they wanted to submit  
their quarrel for the Abbess' decision.  
"Well, bring it out where I can have  
a look. Then I'll decide." "Yes, dear,  
show Her Reverence the prick.  
She will make a judgement quick."

Fabliaux are full of the French three-letter words that correspond to English four-letter words. One time, weary of the usual equivalents for *vit*, *con*, etc., I decided to substitute meaningless monosyllables, and was surprised at how hard it was to find any! I came up with *zikk* for prick, *fonn* for cunt, and *noop* for what characters do with *zikks* and *fonns*. A lot of nooping goes on in fabliaux, though not in this one. By the way, the original Old French tales are in 8-syllable rhymed couplets. Luckily for the reader, I'm not adopting that tedious form here, except for a little rhyme at the end of each stanza.

"... She will make a judgement quick."

And the Lady who had found it  
drew the prick from her bosom  
and placed it before the nuns,  
who stared at it fondly. But I swear  
it was the abbess who gazed  
most eagerly. She sighed three long  
drawn-out sighs, and said: "You're wrong!"

I won't award to one of you  
something that belongs to us!  
It's neither yours nor your companions.'  
Just the other day, the bolt was stolen  
from our convent door, and I demand  
it be restored, the abbey's gain.  
Then she spoke to Dame Elaine,

Standing near the Stewardess. "See  
that it's returned to where it came from.  
That's my wish." Sister Elaine

took it in her slim, white sleeve.  
The ladies, who'd lost out,  
departed weeping, not again  
to ask the Abbess' opinion!

Next time they found such an object  
they'd keep it as a precious relic.

Years ago, I had a chance to become an internationally known specialist in Old French comic tales.

I discovered them deep in the stacks of the University of Michigan Library after completing a doctorate in Old French literature. The Arthurian romances and Christian Saints' Lives I'd studied offered ample opportunity for further work, but the raunchy fabliaux seemed to offer something else— a bit of fun, which I missed in my life as an under-employed PhD entering her middle years. My future looked brighter on the day I received from *Playboy Magazine* a check, adorned with a tiny bunny, in payment for my translation of "*La Sorisete aux Estopes*," "The Little Rag Mouse." In that tale, a Peasant marries without ever having had sex with a woman. On the wedding night, his more experienced bride deceives him by claiming to have left her *fonn* at her mother's house in the next town. When the Peasant goes to look for it, he leaves space in their bed for her lover, the Priest. And the Mouse? I'll tell you about her later. What matters is that not many more checks arrived from *Playboy*, and I had to look for a respectable job. I looked for three years before finding one in the French and Italian Department of a small Pennsylvania college. In 1982, thanks in part to publishing a lengthy, much-footnoted article on "Sexual Language and Human Conflict in the Old French Fabliau" I earned tenure, and, with it, a sabbatical leave. I wondered where I would go—timid traveller that I am.

At professional conferences, I had found that giving papers on three-letter words was a good way to flirt. (I was not too timid for that.) During one meeting of the Northeast Modern Language Association, a Québécois medievalist and former Dominican monk flirted back, and I would eventually pursue him to his northern lair. To the Dean of my college and the Center for Medieval Studies at the University of Montreal I proposed my project: a monograph “On the Circulation of Animals in Old French fabliaux.” In autumn of 1983, Québec greeted me warmly, charmingly, abundantly. I wrote:

**In Montreal, a Professor of French Goes Mad**

I am well come to a town  
with a Coast of Snows,  
a Coast of Saint Catherine, patron  
of spinsters and women in labor.

Here is the Avenue of Pines.

Here are the hands,  
on Jeanne Mance Street,  
of Marjolaine, the masseuse.

I feel her patois  
improve me.

*Merci*, I say ...

Then, the winds turned cold and the first sleet fell on Côtés des Neiges. I had foolishly tried to turn a far love into a near one. I watched my idyll go the way of all idylls, and, without it, found my scholarly task too heavy to bear.

*Merci*, I say ...  
*Bienvenue*,  
she replies: Welcome, and not  
(as they say in Paris)

For nothing ...  
There is no for which ...

O.K. 'Bye, Marjolaine.

*Bonne fin de semaine!*  
Sings the man in the rain.

Having said good-bye to the man in the rain, I laid aside the monograph forever, and with it the chance of becoming a known specialist in Old French bawdy tales. Then, in order not to go really mad—as mad as Gaucelm Laudet in his prison cell—I needed a new task, one that would work the way Gaucelm's sestina had worked for him.

**Unwritten Monograph “On the Circulation of Animals in Old French fabliaux” (outline)**

A. Basic Fabliau Joke: Because of a Woman's scheme, a Husband is cuckolded by Priest, Monk, or Wandering Clerk. The typical fabliau ends when the scheme succeeds, for example, at the moment the Peasant, thinking his Wife has left her *fonn* at her Mother's, goes to fetch it and the Priest can replace him in bed.

B. Basic Joke Elaborated: “The Little Rag-Mouse” follows the Peasant to his Mother-in-law's house where the reader sees further results of the scheme. When he announces his errand, the older woman registers no surprise at being asked for the *fonn*, but figures her daughter is plotting something interesting and falls in with the plot. She hands her son-in-law a basket of rags. “Here, take this. It's in the basket.”

C. Further Elaboration: The Peasant goes off across the field where he is overcome by a desire to perform, here and now, the act he has heard so much about (a novel variation on far love!) He unbuttons his fly. Unbeknownst to anyone, a Mouse has made its nest in the rags. Frightened by the *zikk* that looms before it, the Mouse jumps from the basket and scampers away, stopping some distance off to taunt the Peasant with high-pitched squeaks. The panicked bridegroom gives chase and tries to lure the *fonn* back with assurances that he

will treat it well and let it go back to bed before forcing himself upon it. No more *nooping* away from home, he promises, but the Mouse will have none of him.

D. Disheartening Dénouement: The stymied Peasant returns and climbs into bed, where his Wife consoles him: Don't worry. The *fonn* has come home after all. But the bridegroom finds that it's no longer as fresh as it should be, having been soiled "by falling in the dew." At which point the tale-teller adds a moral, though who knows how seriously it is meant to be taken.

As I've taught you by this fable  
Woman is the Devil.  
Strike out both my eyes  
If this is bad advice.  
She'll hoodwink anyone  
With her brain or tongue.  
Husband, watch your spouse  
Or lose your own Rag Mouse.

My monograph would not concern itself with morals but would focus on the metamorphoses of the Mouse. Where did it go after escaping the Peasant? We know it didn't reenter the household or play a further role in the Wife/Peasant/Priest triangle. This Mouse of Imagination, having shape-shifted into a rag and a runaway vulva, had recently become a check for \$400! A month of groceries for me and my kids. I reflected that the anonymous rhymer who first recited "La Sorisete" might also have received grocery-money in exchange for his Joke, Elaborations, Dénouement, and Moral.

That was to be the theme of my monograph: Exchange. Transformation, Money.

The hey-day of fabliaux was the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which, I had been led to understand, corresponded with the rise of town economies in Northern France, with commercial fairs, merchant guilds, and other ways of getting around taboos on lending and circulating money.

To think I was planning to master all that social history and economic theory, to read the church fathers and their writings against usury, to trace the development of coinage and currency, and ... Poor Little Mouse, by the time I was through with her she would have become so laden with false (really false!) erudition, so poisoned with ill-digested jargon, that she could not have scampered across another field or hidden in another rag-basket. I don't regret that monograph. But I miss the Mouse and wonder what became of her.

### **A Mouse's Crisis**

She runs across a wheatfield, refugee  
from Paradise in widow's rags—  
*estopes*, stuff, washed and shredded,  
shredded and washed  
to a tee.

The mouselet has lived a soft life  
and never learned ancestral ways  
of surviving on grain from husks  
fallen in muddy furrows—stale, mildewy  
grain, though she would eat some now,  
God knows.

The night is cold.  
Is there shelter? Here! Stone wall.  
A chink. "I'll crawl in." She flops—  
Whoops—to the floor of an unlit room.  
Someone's kitchen?

What's that smell?

Molten wax, burnt wicks, stale incense  
in the anteroom where a Priest  
dons robes, the Priest  
we met before,

but he's not here.

He's home asleep, having nooped  
the Peasant's Wife. He may or may not  
come Sunday to say Mass.  
(He seldom does, being lazy  
and without a true vocation.)

That is why,  
in the vestry cupboard, unused  
wafers lie—their scent just strong



more than a game ... Two people have already given me their 6 words and were pleased with the results. One says of his sestina:

*"I love to read it when I'm stoned, though it sounds nice when I'm not, too."*

Another writes:

*"It is good to give someone 6 words and get back a poem ... [it] becomes a conversation between us."*

Your words can be of any kind: common or proper nouns, verbs, adverbs, or adjectives. They need not have the same number of syllables or the same "beat." They shouldn't rhyme. Some of the words can be incongruous in the context of the others. I just ask that they be words that please, amuse, interest or obsess you.

If you will send a beworded note or card, I will send back your sestina as soon as I'm happy with it. Best wishes and thanks.

Sarah

### Samples Enclosed

One of the samples was my version of Dante's "*al poco giorno e al gran cerchio d'ombra*," his homage to the troubadour Arnaut Daniel.

To the short days, to the long, circling shadows  
I come, alas, to whitening mountains,  
and to the time when grass  
loses color; but my desire stays green  
implanted as it is in the hard stone  
that speaks and feels as if it were a lady.

Dante would never have solicited end-words from a friend, no more than a master chef would ask a rival cook for ingredients. The great Florentine knew that the words he wanted were *ombra, colle, erba, verde, petra, donna*. *Shadow* would react ominously with *mountain*; *stone* would abrade the *green* of *grass*, and the tense relationships would create the image he wanted of a particular *lady*.

Another simulacrum: This new lady  
stays frozen as the snow in shadow  
as unmoved as any stone  
by the sweet season that warms mountains  
and turns them from white to green  
by scattering flowers and grass.

Rotating incompatibles would carry the poet into a harsh season from which he attempts to escape through memory and wish ...

When, in her hair, she wears a tress of grass,  
driving from my mind all other ladies,  
a curl of yellow mingles with the green,  
and Love itself rests in that shadow;  
Love holds me in its little mountains  
more firmly than mortar holds a stone.

... though most often memory and wish only intensify the harshness.

Her beauty has more power than any stone.  
Its wound cannot be healed by herb or grass.  
I've fled across the plains and mountains  
because I would escape such a lady.  
Against her light no shadow  
falls from hill, wall, or bough of green.

Once, I saw her dressed in green,  
so lovely she would turn to stone  
the love I feel, even for her shadow.  
I desired her in a field of grass,  
she as amorous as any lady,  
and the field, encircled by high mountains.

By the fifth stanza (if not before!), monotony sets in. But just as we weary of the stony landscape, the poet turns it upside down with an antique "impossibility" figure:

Yet rivers will flow into the mountains,  
before that timber, soft and green,  
is kindled like a lovely lady  
loving me. And I would sleep on stone  
each night, or graze on grass,  
to see the place her skirt casts shadows.

Standing on its head, the poem takes a fleeting look under the lady's skirt before pulling out over a wintry panorama.

When mountains cast the deepest shadows,  
a youthful lady covers them with green-  
ness, as men hide stone under the grass.

I've lost the other sample I included with my call for words, a sestina of mine. I know Fox, Moon, and Ruby were three of the end-words, and I'm sure the friend for whom I wrote it was kind to say the poem "sounded nice" when he wasn't stoned. I must have re-read "Nocturnal Fox" at some point, felt ashamed of it, and thrown it out. Yet that poem was no more embarrassing than the others. They were all beginner poems, especially embarrassing because I wasn't young when I wrote them. As art, the Sestina Game project was doomed for a dozen reasons but instead of enumerating them, I'm trying to write its razo.

### Angela

I got several letters. (All my friends love words, and some love playing games.) The response that lingers longest in my mind came from my Italian colleague, Angela Jeannet. It arrived in an envelope which, when opened, released six tiny paper parachutes, each bearing a word: Memory, Morning, Tender, Fire Thorn, Sea, and Quartz. I would labor (all too hard!) to construct "*nontiscordardime*" (forget-me-not) and to show off my acquaintance with Angela's language.

Sometimes you need a medieval Art of Memory  
to recall the hours: Morning,  
remembered as a dim and tender  
summons; noon screams like a fire thorn;  
evening spreading on a bay or sea;  
night and virtues, bright as quartz.

That sestina peters out half-way through the second stanza, though there are two nice lines near the end:

On overleaves, the autumn's tender  
quail dart in and out of memory.

The poem has no life in it. No death either.

### **Lorenzo**

Lorenzo Pezzatini, a Florentine like Angela, is a conceptual artist specializing, at the time, in string: meters and meters of it, bright yellow with dollops of red and blue acrylic paint squeezed through a pastry tube to look like thorns on a stem. He would wind, weave, drape, and coil the stuff around indoor and outdoor spaces and sometimes around himself, in configurations requiring great patience on his part. “Have a little pity,” he would say to his audience, pity for his obsession, for his bewildering project, for his defiance of practicality. His plea resounds in my mind as I contemplate the strings of sestinas I wove around myself that year despite the unlikely, lonely, goofiness of the task, despite anything my College Professional Standards Committee might say when I returned and submitted a sabbatical report. The words Lorenzo sent were impossible. “Quasi-steel, Chiasma, Seduction, Plastic, Myth, and Hair.” His sestina, “Suspended Things,” is the emptiest, most cacophonous poem I ever wrote. There’s a sniper in it looking from “the window of a quasi-steel/ hotel” through his range-finder—“twin hairs/ meeting in a menacing chiasma.”

### **Carolyn**

I met my most eminent word-donor when she came to give a talk in our Women’s Studies program. Carolyn Heilbrun, distinguished Columbia Professor, feminist critic, and mystery-writer, became interested in my project: “Dear Sarah, Of course I’m terrifically busy ... but I like your game and wanted to send off my greetings and my six words ... most unpoetic but [they] are the concepts I’m living with at the moment. They surface, in fact, in my next detective novel which will be out in March or April and is called *Sweet Death, Kind Death* from a poem of Stevie Smith’s. Anyway, the words are Death, Friend, Marriage, Biography, Conversation, Story ... In my mind they none of them mean what we have mainly

or conventionally assumed them to mean ... Why did you pick Montreal to be lonely in, I wonder ... don't trouble to answer by mail ...”

Carolyn's *nom de plume* for mystery novels was Amanda Cross, and her sestina is “Tibi Quae Amanda Est,” “you who are to be loved.” (Come to think of it, the verb should be *Es*, not *Est*.) Anyway, Carolyn was indeed loved by many friends despite her sometimes unforgiving views of biography and story.

In letters or in leaves, biographies  
are blown away as precious conversations  
among characters, men and women friends,  
like those I lose when your story  
ends.

Easy enough to bend and stretch some of Carolyn's words. But Death? What else does that mean but itself? I remembered Saint Francis, who had greeted Death as his Sister. He believed that Faith would deliver him from the “Death after Death.” As far as I know, Carolyn did not hold that belief any more than I do. As far as I know, the people she left behind when she took her own life in 2003 found Death to mean exactly what it's conventionally assumed to mean: radical absence, separation from near loves.

### Owen

My younger son managed to find his way from Amherst to Montreal for a visit. It was lovely to see him and have him as a guest in my furnished studio apartment. I remember how impressed he was by the water pressure in the shower (“strong enough to stop a Peace March!”)

During his time with me, he met acquaintances who praised my ingenuity at inventing and executing the Sestina Game. “I don't see what's so hard about it,” he said. “O.K. you try.” And Owen, who had strenuously avoided literary study of any kind,

promised he would try, but returned to school without my having assigned his words. He came up with his own, and soon I received them in the mail. (Someone must have explained that he didn't need a Canadian stamp.) His first, and probably last, sestina recalls his years of floundering through adolescence in my care. Reading it fills me with pain, pride and parental remorse. What a good title he chose:

**“take this”**

Because this was to be an experiment  
I have been made into an engineer.  
no sweat, though hampered by years of smoking grass  
so imagine this scene  
and take it with proverbial salt  
and it will speak about our character.

In a sestina, each end-word gets its turn to be repeated (at the end of one stanza and the beginning of the next).

Something has always been plastic in my character  
partly because I am result of your experiment.

Never in those hard years had I seen Owen as my experiment, but now I had to accept that he saw things that way. The engineer in the first stanza is himself; in the second it's me—“you the engineer” worrying about “rockets made with potassium salt” by him and his buddies, whose pranks often went beyond those suggested in chemistry sets.

The kid is a grown man now, with a rich professional and personal life. Why transcribe here his middle stanzas? They allude to “wounds that opened” during the early years and were still open at the time he wrote. He keeps the six balls in the air: our experiments, our characters, his grass (“you cut the grass/ that I should have mowed”), his disorders, his sadness, though he balances blame with applause for a certain gallantry in my parenting:

I always thought you were a good engineer,  
Mom

and in my zany game.

These poems are a good experiment and your character  
does well to engineer such therapeutic scenes.  
but salt does not affect the grass's growth.

Well, yes it does, and he knew it, but chose to end the poem on a note of reconciliation.

Meanwhile, he gave me the words he wanted me to put in a poem for him (Vodka, Fathom, Silk, Drop, Stain, Force). The result was too awkward to record, and Malcolm, Owen's older brother, never sent any words, though we talked pretty often on the phone.

As Owen's poem showed, sestinas, far from being especially difficult, are ideal beginner poems. Inexperienced poets need a frame to hang words on, and a guiding structure. It's quite easy to put end-words in their proper order along the right hand side of a page:

(1) experiment

(2) engineer

(3) grass

(4) scene

(5) salt

(6) character

Then, as in a spiral, 6 becomes 1, 1 becomes 2, 5 becomes 3, 2 becomes 4, 4 becomes 3, and 3 becomes 4:

character

experiment

salt

engineer

scene

grass,

and so on for 36 lines (medieval manuals called this *retrogradatio crociata*) until, were there to be a seventh stanza, endings would return in the original order (sometimes this happens, and you get a double-sestina, like some of Petrarch's). Once you have ends for all the lines, you need only write 39 beginnings and middles.

[Visit McSweeney's Sestinas.](#)

It's not the form itself that's difficult. It's taking six unlikely words and inveigling them into a poem with some life and music in it. This is very seldom accomplished. In the rare great sestina, such as Elizabeth Bishop's about the *grandmother*, the *almanac*, and the *Little Marvel stove*, the words acquire so much resonance, and the whole becomes so expressive, that the reader almost forgets what form is in play.

Many poets dislike the sestina for its artifice and monotony. I have never written another since overdosing on them 23 years ago. True, there must be some value, some mysterious magic, to a pattern still practiced after a thousand years, in a climate different in nearly every respect from Arnaut Daniel's. But to write sixteen sestinas one after the other was asking too much of the form. Only three were published in magazines, and of those there's only one I can bear to read all the way through (Sue Ellen Holbrook's "Plum"). But, readable or not, the project prevented me from going mad with loneliness. It kept me functioning, learning, and in touch with friends, at least while I worked on their words, inhabited their worlds, and provisionally assumed their interests and sympathies.

An economist colleague, Jack Amariglio, sent words evoking his heady world of Marxist theory, which I began to explore, although, in the end, reading Brecht was about as far as I got.

### **Galileo and Other Renegades**

Aphrodite raised her shaded star one April  
right to the focal point of his desire.  
He trained a lens, as was his practice  
every night—a lens-line, at the time, the only bridge  
connecting Venice to the scene of his critique.  
He saw that Venus, like the moon, is not the origin  
  
of her own light. There had to be another origin.

Other interests of Jack's—jazz, baseball—got wedged into the poem. John Ashbery could have managed it, not me.

So, enough *retrogradatio cruciata*.

But why *sestinas*? Why Arnaut Daniel? Why troubadours? A reason, please.

This razo begins in the recesses of my earliest *amor de lonh*.

## II. My Mother's Comet

### “The Sea Bird”

My poems don't require razors. The ones in this section are meant to explain, not the poems, but my vocation for far love—which I acquired from my mother, Martha, and she from her mother, Grace.

Martha's first near love was her father, Fred Hawley, but he became a far love when Grace left him, taking 7-year-old Martha to Europe along with Wawa (Laura), the nurse. Then, Wawa became Martha's near love, and Grace another far one, roaming around to seek loves of her own, and, failing that, to seek baccarat games. My Grandma frequented posh casinos in Atlantic City and Biarritz, craving action on green baize tables. In one poem, my mother becomes “The Sea Bird.”

With Mama and Wawa  
and Louis Vuitton, she sailed  
when she was 7.

She sang: Aunt Rhody's  
old gray goose with Mama,  
the gayest goose she knew.  
The century was 7 too.

Grace was a restless woman who couldn't stand waiting around if things were not going well for her. She didn't wait around to make a home for Martha, who grew up in a series of hotel suites, homeless except when staying with her Aunt and Uncle in their country house near Bayonne. Nor did Grace wait around for me to be born. I knew only her portrait, hers and Martha's, which hung on the wall of our house. There, I saw Grace posed in fake garden scenery (I didn't know it was fake),

wearing a pouf of “ratted” silver hair, a black and cream lace décolletage, and a smile that suggested she meant to be some sort of mother to the ten-year-old girl nestled in the crook of her arm, placed there by the painter, because (as I later learned) mother and daughter never posed together. Martha wears a knowing scowl, a pleated frock, a floppy taffeta hair-bow. On her lap she holds an open score. Wagner. The Love-Death scene from Tristan, Martha told me at times, though other times she said it was the Siegfried Idyll, either bliss-filled birth or orgasmic death.

They sailed to France and back,  
and sailed again,  
with Halley’s Comet overhead.  
The century was 10.

Aboard the “Lafayette”  
she posed.  
I see her hair-bow flutter  
like a little puff of feathers.

What do I read in her face  
there on the deck of the Lafayette,  
sailing either east or west  
in a blue serge sailor dress?

She knows, of life, I guess,  
What Maisie Knew,  
more or less.

Martha also liked to tell me about the comet and how frightened she’d been in 1910 as it approached. Playing on the Champs-Élysées, she saw picture postcards of Halley’s striking Earth, splitting it into fiery chunks that went tumbling off through space. No serious people thought the Earth would be destroyed this way, but one French astronomer did claim that masses of people would die from cyanide gasses in

the tail. Martha's fear was that the catastrophe would strike at a time when she and Grace were apart. She confided the fear to no one and fretted to the point of illness. But then, she said, Mother arrived and all was well.

“On my birthday,  
in Vevey, over the Alps  
we saw the comet.  
I'll never forget it!”

This reunion of mother and daughter in a backdrop of mountains and comet mixes fact with fiction. Martha's birthday fell in late July, by which time, in 1910, Halley's was no longer visible to the naked eye.

Facts about Halley's: Its dusty tail contains, not cyanide, but ice. At perihelion a few tons of its crystal hair melt in the sun's heat, so, each time around, the comet becomes smaller and will eventually disappear.

### **Song of the Egret of Grace**

She will take my feather.  
She will wear a hat.

She will have a box—  
not to spoil the feather.

Comets are always either approaching or receding, but even when a comet is near Earth, the two bodies are an enormous distance apart, like Grace and Martha, like Martha and me.

It will travel with her  
in the holds of steamers  
  
through Atlantic weather

with a dozen others.

It is made of leather.  
She will wear the hat

and it will have my feather.  
I will tell her daughter.

Grace, in my view, was a silly woman. I like to think my mother's ten-year-old scowl expresses her refusal to grow up silly like her mother. She tried to turn out less vain, improvident, and drifting. She learned better French than her mother or her aunts. She studied and read in two languages. She learned to paint well. When she married and had two children, she stopped painting, unfortunately, but resolved to do a better job of mothering than Grace had, to give us a home, and wait around while we grew up. Such resolutions to improve on a previous generation are often made (I've made them myself) but often the vow merely drives the old pattern a little deeper. From the time I was born until the time I went to school, surrogate caretakers were my near loves, and my parents far ones. The pattern seemed to rule, not only Martha's character, but the outside world as well. By the time I was ten, the second of her world wars had come and gone, taking with it two men of our family, and those events, as well as her own inclination, drew her back to France, where she spent at least three months each year looking after bereaved relations—she, a lovely widow on her side of the Atlantic, I, a longing schoolgirl, on mine.

## **'Long'**

Extending  
through distance, having  
greater  
than usual  
height, a vowel  
of long  
duration  
A in Fate, E in Equal

Extending  
in reach, a fighter's long left jab—  
the long  
I  
in Flight

To long, from too long, tedious, long to have greater  
than usual reach, to hear *the long voice*  
*of the hounds,*  
the O in Go.

When she was in France she thrived on my adoring letters. When she returned she was wounded by my cool welcome and sulky ways. I looked so much like the grouchy girl in the portrait that people thought, despite the Edwardian décor, that its subjects were my mother and me. I was puzzled by my own response to Martha. She was so charming, called me such affectionate names, and had suffered so much grief. But she had become my far love and I couldn't shift her back into my near one. Many people have trouble with that shift. The troubadours, for example, never made it. It was far love they needed most. I need both, but when given the choice, I've tended to take far.

**Map of France II**

Among the 5 rivers

—S e i n e & M a r n e,

R

h

& L o

ô

i

n

r

e

e,

R

lord of them all,

h

ô

n

e

I saw her

in Hermès silk

@ Paris

A château-fleuve

to the South the sky

blue light

from

the Basses Pyrenées her address

near

Pau

near Saint-

John

of

Light

a r o n n e

G a r o n

G

n e

has seen across

and heard

a far-off love is born.

Once a girl

the blind Atlantic—

above its roar ...

## Girls and Wars

She knew there had been a war in France thirty years before she was born. She knew France had lost because Huns were beasts. After the war, they were still beasts, but they ran a tight ship, and she was aboard one of them—the Amerika, with a K—when the first of her wars broke out. The ship had to turn around in mid-Atlantic because France and England were blockading the Channel and no German ship could dock at Southhampton or Le Hâvre. It was August, 1914.

This was hard on Martha. America with a C held no home for her, and no school. Wars were horrid. What would become of her beloved Aunt and Uncle who lived in France?

“This is Aunt Julia,” Grace had said to Martha. The toddler had looked up at her slight, fair aunt, mouthed the word “Odoody,” and “Odoody” the woman remained for the whole family, in stories my mother told about her to anyone who would listen. In my mind, these anecdotes made my grandmother’s younger sister sound very odd: a girl who had taken to her bed at the drop of a hat and who tyrannized the household with mysterious ailments; a young woman whose chronic malaise so stymied her doctor that he said he could do nothing for her, and recommended that she become a Christian Scientist, which she did, adopting the beliefs of Mary Baker Eddy, another odd woman. That same doctor recommended that Julia’s reproductive organs be disabled, which they were, or so everyone thought. Perhaps doctors performed a mock hysterectomy as some sort of exorcism,

because, at 40, Odoody was operated on for a supposed appendicitis, found to be pregnant, and quickly sewn up again. I thought stories like these suited a person named Odoody. But there was also a tragic story about the death of her son, and I wondered how that could be. Would the worst thing that could happen to anyone happen to a person with a name that sounded like what dogs do in flower beds?

Martha told stories, odd and sad, about Odoody and Uncle Charles, which she pronounced “Sharl,” the portrait-painter whom Julia Anderson married in 1910 in Paris, where she had gone to study singing though “she had no voice.” I heard endlessly about this Aunt and Uncle, saw their photographs, their silverware monogrammed JAW, and Uncle Charles’ paintings—varnished, academic affairs untouched by any influence of French *refusé*, *cubiste* or *fauve*. I absorbed the lore of these far loves of Martha’s. It was as if she wanted to embed their lives in my brain, knowing that one day her own brain would fail and the lives would lose all meaning. Did they have any meaning to begin with? How could I know while she was so assiduously describing them, displacing my own impressions with her own, filling my nervous system with her memories and wars?

“I saw the comet.  
I’ll never forget it!”

Then she forgot it.  
I wrote, and read aloud,  
some tales that she had told.

“Aboard ‘Amerika’ (with a K)  
you watched the gulls’ cotillion,  
and heard a War had just begun.  
The century was 14.

“Go tell Aunt Rhody right away!”  
You had to double back  
to plain America  
and couldn't go to school in France.”

It often seems to me that Martha is dictating these pages. Nonetheless, I resolve that from now on there is no Odoody. Her name was Julia Anderson Willems. Oddly or not, she conceived a child in 1915, which shocked her American family—an older brother, his wife, and their sister, Grace. Julia was 40, allegedly frail, married to a minor *artiste* who did not strike his American relatives as particularly competent. Grace was dispatched to Paris where the birth would take place. Paris, so near the front, and besieged by the terrible Huns.

At Miss Bennett's School, in Millbrook, New York, Martha was alone in the spot where Grace had ensconced her in 1914, after the return of the Amerika. None of her schoolmates shared her involvement with French events—trench warfare, retreats, and poison gasses. Alone, the fifteen-year-old awaited news of the three most important people in the world. And the cable came: Joy in war-torn Paris. A Perfect Boy.

### **Across the tree**

... I'll draw a dotted line  
between two cousins:

Martha, b. 1900 in St. Louis  
Frederick, b. 1916 in Paris  
under zeppelins  
and evil stars.

She didn't meet the miraculous child until after the war. He was 2, still perfect, blond like his mother, sturdy and spoiled like his father, naughty with nurses, tender with Julia, conspiratorial with his pretty cousin Martha. She was sixteen years older than he but half a generation younger than his parents. Two onlies, they became devoted allies.

They travelled  
in one another's countries.  
She was sister to him,  
mother, almost lover.

After these lines, "Across the Tree" skips more than 20 years, leaping, as a poem can, to a new war that began when Frederick was 23. His parents hoped he would take advantage of his dual citizenship and go live safely in America, but he felt French, and had a sense of chivalry—or of cavalry, which was the branch of the army he chose because he liked to ride. From September, 1939, to May, 1940, his unit was stationed in Flanders. His letters that winter and spring, written from the impregnable Maginot Line, sounded as if he, his men, and the horses were enjoying themselves. Then came June, which my poem, "Across the Tree," pretends to remember with its panicked letters, cables, news and tears.

And when he died at 24  
from a bullet through the eye,

Mort pour la France  
*sur le coup et sans souffrance ...*

In fact, I was not quite four and don't remember, but letters kept coming up to the time when my memory kicks in—airmail, grief for a first cousin once and forever removed.

... the news flew over  
in envelopes  
with chevron borders.  
She opened them

And wept.  
I tried to fathom  
her lovely tears. I wanted  
to collect them,  
divert the stream,

and I grew mean  
over a blond, dead boy  
who whispered to my mother  
in two tongues

At home in upstate New York, Edmund my father waited until the U.S. entered the war so he could enter it too, though he didn't have to. He was 38, father of two, and in poor health. But he too had been raised in a household mourning its war heroes. One of his older brothers had been killed at Gallipoli, the other scarred in a fiery dog-fight over France. And I think my father was as jealous as I was of Freddie, who'd had the luck to die and occasion so much grief in Martha. In 1941, for these and other reasons, my father enlisted despite age, asthma, and congenital heart trouble. The Army Air Corps never sent him overseas but stationed him in far-off Georgia, where he ran the post exchange of a training camp. Even that stress was too much for him and he was medically discharged in 1944. He came home, still sick, around V-E Day, celebrated the end of the war with us in August, and died in

September. My brother had just turned fifteen and I was turning nine. Martha, of course, gave Edmund a solemn burial (keeping the folded flag) but never shed as many tears for him as for Frederick. Eddie, Bill, and I were her near loves, but we all wished we could have been her far ones.

In France, a florist  
tended Frederick's tomb,  
just for the money,  
decking the stones  
with bloodless roses—

My ally, Monsieur Gelos.

### **More Girls and Wars**

The girl ties herself to a mast to keep from steering toward islands where she might hear more about wars. The damp ropes hold, but siren music enters her unstopped ears. Homer's sirens, it is said, were monk seals barking along the reefs of Li Galli islands, but even supposing that's what they were, if the girl sailed by, she would hear songs of her war.

Tip-toe, in Mother's victory garden,  
she seeks a sky-borne silhouette,  
perhaps her favorite—  
twin-tailed P-48.

Far-off, Father knows his girl  
has learned the Air Corps silhouettes.

He's far-off. She is resigned.  
One day, he's home  
but goes again, and stays away.  
This fills her brain.

She knows it's wrong.  
She's one of many girls  
with many fathers, yet  
until her brain is dust  
no war but hers exists.

In a few years, not a living soul will know there were victory gardens, plane spotting, or P-48's, and the girl's little poem will not mean a thing. But she shouts that her war must not be forgotten. Her mother did not let *her* forget. Why should she let others crowd out her war with theirs?

In January, 1991, she sat beside Mother's bed in the nursing home. Nearby TVs roared, and reddened with flaming oil rigs, but the old woman, who had lost her sight, exclaimed: "Thank God there are no wars any more!" She was only blind, not deaf. She knew very well what was happening. There were still wars, and a new one had begun. What she meant was that there were no more wars as great as hers, none with the power to bereave as she and her dear aunt had been bereft.

## Shadows

The poet Robert Desnos died in a prison camp just before the end of the war.

He addressed "*Le dernier poème*" to his wife:

I have dreamed so much of you  
that I have become a shadow among shadows  
a hundred times more shadow than the shadow ...  
the shadow that comes and goes  
in your illuminated life.

It struck me as the key in which to write a poem about Julia.

**Julia Willems, Her Son at War**

May he not die.  
May he not crawl into a shadow and die.  
May the shadow be sent to me.

May he die and think a brave lie.  
May the truth be sent to me.

May he not die seeing another woman's child shoot him in the eye.  
May he not die shooting another woman's child in the eye.

And may no other woman's child survive him.

**Map of France III**

Wondrous were the syllables my mother strung together!

*What was the name of the gardener with a club foot who buried the silver?*

A farmer carried letters East  
to Pau—miles from the château—

folded in his boot—  
I knew his name. Did she want that?

Or censors' names in Lisbon  
who tore them, taped them up again,

and let them go—  
a private woe

in envelopes with chevron borders  
for Britton the postmaster

to slip into our box—  
a number I remembered,

and Saint Martin, patron

of a village near Bayonne

where Lafourcade the farmer  
farmed. No, it was the gardener's

name she wanted. I found it for her—  
*Broquedise*—and never found the silver.

Decades went by before I could travel in France unburdened by this stuff. On the first trip, I was seventeen and traipsed behind Martha—first to Paris, where I sat in on dress-fittings *chez* Jacques Heim, ate my first croissant, and became enamoured of the Unicorn Lady at the Cluny Museum. In Biarritz, I met the legendary “Uncle Charl,” a widower by then who had painted nothing for years but his own wrinkled face with pancake make-up. He wore a matted hairpiece and flirted grotesquely, tapping my mother on the behind, ogling my legs when I wore shorts. His Basque domestics, Noélie and Pierre, were the only other “French” people I met. The rest were elderly Brits and Americans from the Willems’ dwindling circle of expatriates.

On subsequent trips, I continued to carry her map, once deliberately to trace the family and get the war stories out of my system—that was fifteen years ago! My research guided me to the old château (though not to the silver) and to the site where Frederick’s remains had lain since the end of the war, exhumed from the Normandy village where he was killed, transported to Biarritz’ Cimetière de Sabao. All three Willems lie under the pink marble block and huge white cross chosen by Frederick’s bereaved mother. I noted Gelos’ flower shop nearby, and threw away the frayed,

weather-washed synthetic flowers I found on the site. I was the last family member who would ever visit the tomb or even know it's there,.

This is why I wash the tombs  
of those who mourned him.  
They mourn no longer. Their distress  
is gone, but I must come

to them. I'm on to other dooms  
and have other fish  
to fry tomorrow but I'll wash the tombs  
and fix a picnic. Everybody comes.

I took the whole morbid, lonely trip just to collect a few things to tell her about things she'd told me.

She drowns. I read:  
"You were at sea.

"The War! the school!  
Nothing to do  
but settle in your cabin,  
and read Innocents Abroad."

My mother sat up in a flurry:

"Oh! I loved that story."

## Map of France IV

*“We have written to Tarbes.”*

Nowadays I follow my own maps to places that would surprise her—Auvillar, Moissac, Toulouse. I have other fish to fry in Southwest France, and rarely think of the Willems. But recently, as friends took me on an excursion from Toulouse to St. Bertrand de Comminges, I was transfixed by a name on the road signs: “Tarbes” I remembered a letter of June 1940. Frederick’s parents were trying to locate his unit after the Maginot Line débacle. They had written, Aunt Julia said, to the Swiss Red Cross, and “we have written to Tarbes.” I wanted François and Marie to stop the car. I wanted to tell them that had a cousin who had gone to cavalry school in Tarbes. He’d been killed in Normandy in 1940—ten years, at least, before they were born. I needed to tell my two French friends what a terrible war it had been.

## Pietà

There is something sinister in the Reasons for my poems about the Willems and the war—something to do with the child I was when I first heard the stories, and with their persistence in my life. My mother recorded them for me on cassettes, but that was unnecessary. There was already a tape running in my head: “we have written to Tarbes,” “*sur le coup et sans souffrance*,” “our immeasurable sorrow,” Broquedise, Lafourcade, St. Martin de Seignanx. Decades before I became a mother myself, I was sucked into the maternal anguish of a great-aunt I never knew. I can still read what she wrote on July 24<sup>th</sup>, 1940, my mother’s fortieth birthday—“I know all your hearts are aching with ours.” The letter, having said what it needed to say to my mother, should have been destroyed. I should never have seen it. It has prevented me from understanding that or any other war. Julia’s phrases congeal into a hulking monument, a larger than life-sized marble woman with a stone corpse on her stone knees. The figure looms, absorbs all the light that might illumine millions of Mothers, *Madres, Müttern* ... and make them matter.

*8-6-45 Here*

To a child of nine  
it was a small

sun flown  
to Japan in a plane

expanded to astound  
an Emperor a town

in the cloud limbs  
torn skins gone the suns

would expand  
in small bones

and all was well.  
The fathers would come home.

## War Poems

About the conflict that turned my mother's ship in mid-ocean Ezra Pound

wrote:

... Died some, *pro patria*,

*non "dulce" non "et decor" ...*

walked eye-deep in hell

...

Daring as never before, wastage as never before.

Young blood and high blood,

fair cheeks and fine bodies ...

...

laughter out of dead bellies.

There died a myriad,

and of the best, among them,

for an old bitch gone in the teeth,

For a botched civilization ...

These lines from "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" are cited in *The Oxford Book of*

*War Poetry* rather than Pound's famous Altaforte sestina.

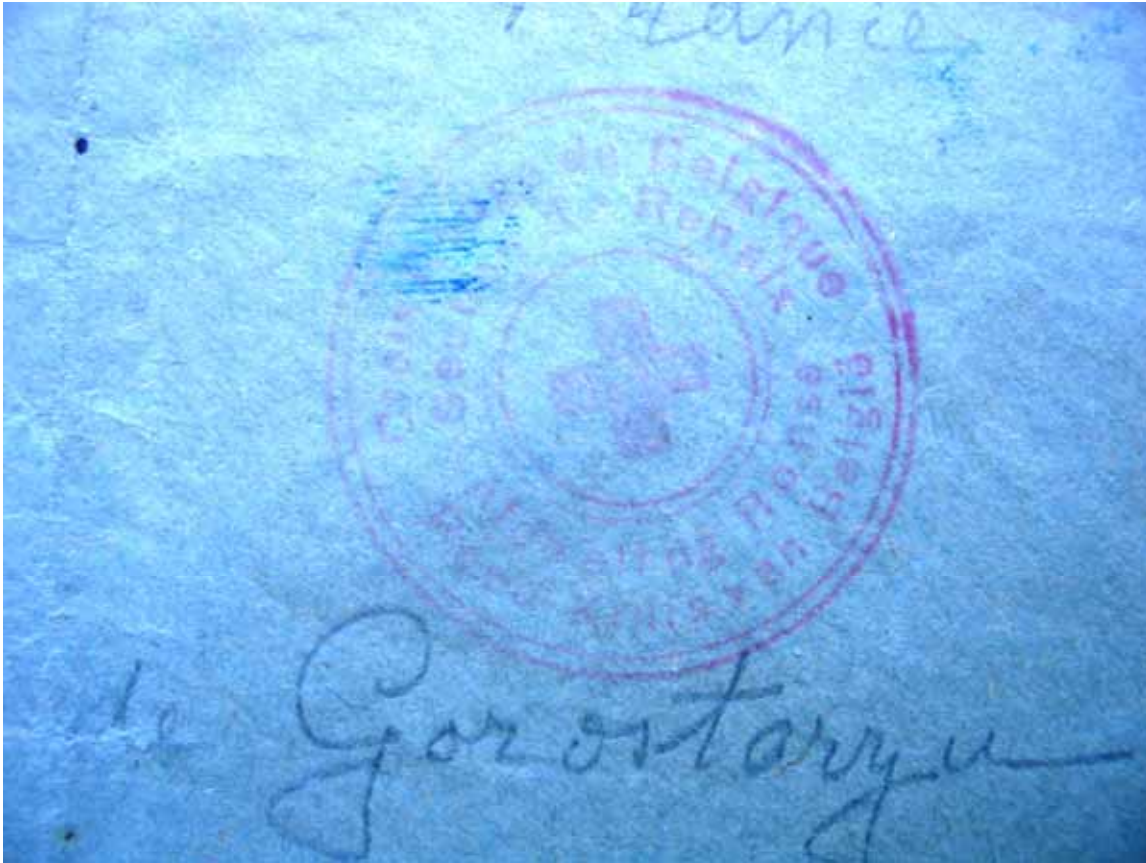
Closest to me among war poems is a pencilled letter to

Madame Gorostaya

3, rue Vauban

Bayonne

Basses-Pyrénées



27 June—1940

Madame

*I apologize for asking you to perform a painful mission, that is, if you are able to do so. I had a Sergeant in my platoon, Frederick Willems, whose parents live in the Landes, in St. Martin de Seignanx. He was killed by a bullet through the eye (instantly and painlessly). I myself am a prisoner and unable to inform his family otherwise than by letter (which I cannot do). Having found in his wallet an invitation to a surprise party coming from you, I thought you might be able to tell either his family or some family friends that you could find in the area, if you don't know the Willems family well enough.*

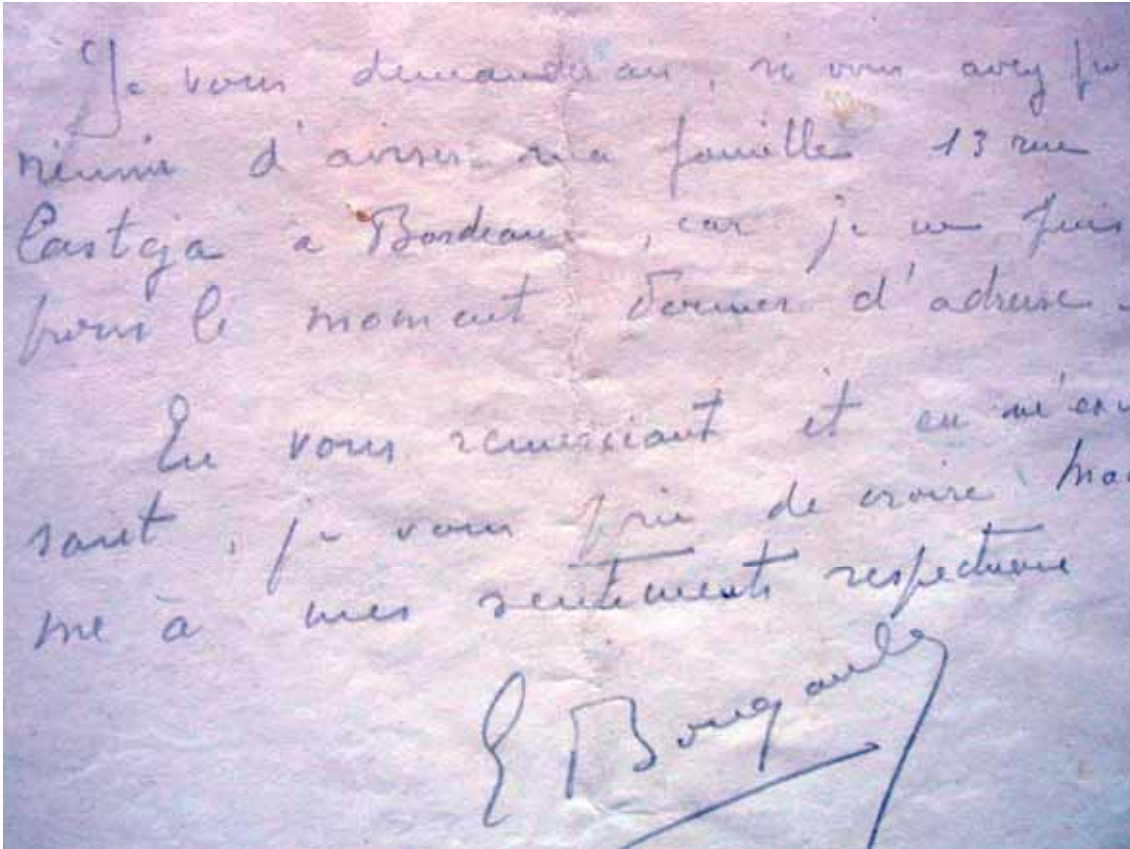
*I would ask you, if you can, to get in touch with my family at 13 rue Castega in Bordeaux, because I cannot at the moment give them an address.*

*Thanking you, and asking your pardon, I beg you to accept my respectful greetings.*

*E Bougault*

Lieutenant Bougault  
Prisonnier de Guerre

Far from the battlefield, yet hardly at peace, my mother visited Hell from time to time by re-reading the letter. It lay long in her desk and now lies in mine, growing paler each time I expose it to daylight.



Je vous demandais, si vous avez pu  
rien d'arriver à la famille 13 rue  
Castija à Bordeaux, car je ne puis  
vous le moment. Donner d'adresse.

En vous remerciant et en me cou-  
rant, je vous prie de croire ma-  
me à mes sentiments respectueux

Bougault

### III. Paths to Occitania

Most American poets who read troubadours do so because of Ezra Pound. Pound read them because of Dante. Many of my contemporaries found Dante on Pound's extensive reading list, then trekked further down the list to look at troubadours. For me the route was different: first Dante, then troubadours, then Pound. But why Dante?

When I went to college, my heart's desire was to be a poet, but I wasn't a poet and couldn't imagine how to become one. I consoled myself by learning Italian and enrolling in a course on Dante, and the *Commedia* became a new heart's desire. I hoped for the rest of my life to keep reading the divine encyclopedia. The man who opened it for me was Charles Singleton, heir to a distinguished line of scholars in Harvard's Dante Chair, first held by Longfellow, then James Russell Lowell, and later Charles Grandgent, Singleton's immediate predecessor, editor of my student edition of the *Commedia*. Grand Gent indeed! "Names are the consequences of things," says Dante.

It's because of Dante (though ultimately because of my mother) that my study and practice of poetry have been so skewed toward romance languages rather than the language I live in—skewed toward far loves and away from the near and dear one. A friend once told me my poems sounded like translations from another language.

"The Parting of the Robes," for example,

Late last November,

your tawny gown and my plum-red one  
sewn hem to hem  
kept us warm

April is cold in the red silks alone sounds like false Japanese.

Ten years after graduating from the college once called Radcliffe, I went to grad school at the University of Michigan to get certified for high school French teaching. I never received the certificate but fled from pattern drills, quizzes, ditto machines, and unruly adolescents into the safety of seminar rooms. In my doctoral program, I chose the medieval period as my specialty. I wanted the most distant possible refuge from own life and times, and I needed another excuse to read Dante. It was on my second trip through the *Commedia* that I stopped to acquaint myself with troubadours. I was curious to learn why Dante as an apprentice had studied troubadours, and why as a mature poet he had placed a troubadour in each of his three realms. It occurs to me now that by introducing and describing them in Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, he was writing a kind of raso for each one, extrapolating from their poems and vidas a commentary to guide future readers of their songs.

[Visit the troubadours.](#)

In those days, I saw Arnaut Daniel as by far the most compelling *Commedia* troubadour, so, as I didn't know Old Occitan, I used Gianluigi Toia's Italian edition of his poems to try to discern the voice of the man who invented sestinas.

## Arnaut Daniel Speaks His Reasons

I sing for the usual reasons ...

because branches are budding  
and tree-tops  
are coloring with many flowers,  
greening with leaves,  
and the songs and calls  
of birds fill shady spots  
of the forest.

*Puois que*, because, also contains the idea of time, “post,” which begins as temporal and ends up causal—*post hoc ergo propter hoc*—not always a fallacy. “I sing *since* the branches are budding,” and

because [pel, this time] of the song in the forest  
and in order that no one reproach me  
I work and smoothe  
worthy words  
with the skills of Love,  
from which I can’t sever my heart.

Those are the basic occasions for the poem. You can take them as given, and recognize them from now on when I repeat them with variations. (*D’altra guiza e d’altra rason*) ...

In another way and on another theme  
and differently from usual, I must sing.  
Don’t think that from my pain  
I hope to make a good, sweet song.

Given that my honor as a poet-lover, as well as the weather and the birds, make me sing, I must explain that this particular song will be harsh and difficult because, at the moment, love itself is harsh and difficult:

I hope to make a good song

but I have to ask many people's forgiveness  
for singing about the one who does me wrong ...

Between the lady's behavior, and that of the mischief-makers around us, my many efforts are in vain. She resists me the way hard wood resists the plane, and snarled hair refuses the comb, and precious materials defy the artisan. But I persist (because of love, the weather, and ... did I mention the birds?) Struggle is my mainspring.

In the world's first sestina, I struggle to *enter a chamber* and a *soul* defended by an *uncle* with a *nail* and a *stick*. The siege is exhausting but wondrous. How many others have sung so well such unkempt words? Just try writing six stanzas using terms like those at the ends here—

The firm desire that enters  
my heart won't be deterred by the beak or the nail  
of a flatterer whose gossip will cost him his soul.  
I don't dare beat him up with a branch or stick,  
(not openly), but, out there where lives no uncle  
of mine, I'll enjoy myself in an orchard or chamber.

What with the gossips I mentioned earlier, I often resort to speaking in code about my plight, declaring my identity but not my precise situation or the futile strategies I employ.

I am Arnautz who gathers air,  
chases the hare with the ox  
and swims against the current.

These lines are encoded, but enough of my listeners have the key so I can reference the lines and show later developments in my life as a poet-lover.

Love and joy and place and time  
return my mind

to that trouble I had a year or so ago  
when I hunted the hare with the ox.  
Now it goes worse and better for me in love,  
for I love well (and for that call myself lucky)  
but don't have any certainty of joy  
if Love and pleading don't conquer her hard heart ...

and here ...

Before the top branches  
of trees remain dry or leafless ...

Soon the trees will have dried out and lost their greenery, but old age is no excuse.

Love still commands me  
to sing a brief song with a long theme  
(*breu chansson de rason loigna ...*)

You'll have noticed that *razo* means not just "reason" but "topic," and, at times, "rule" or "method," the kind of thing one learns in school. Once a student, always a student. My own school is one where Love is the teacher and the principal.

... he's taught me so well the arts of his school  
that I know how to stop the current,  
and my ox can outrun the hare ...

Get it? No? Too bad. That's all you'll hear about my life or my reasons. Until I die, that is.

Then, scribes and commentators will come and explain in prose why I wrote such difficult songs. Their explanations will be crude, without nuance, irony, or double-entendre. It will be suggested that my ox (*'bou'*) owed its existence to the surname (Bouville) of my lady's husband (Madame Bouville? Never heard of her!)

and that I stole one of my songs from a mere *jongleur*. No one believes those stories.

Everyone admires me. Even the great Dante. I can tell a few stories about him.

He got many of his ideas from me. He imitated my voice in songs about some difficult love of his.

*Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro ...*

Thus, in my speech I want to be as harsh  
as the acts of that lovely stone lady  
hardened  
by ever more harshness and cruelty,  
who puts on such armor  
that because of it  
no arrow from any quiver  
can strike her naked skin.

From me he learned the flinty struggle between feelings and verbal material (but it's more difficult to sing harshly in Italian than in Occitan!) Then, a hundred years after my death, when he visited Hell, he would remember my “unkempt words” and use them to describe thickets of sin, *questa selva selvaggia ed aspr'e forte*.

While on that pilgrimage he reached Purgatory, and the two of us met face to face ... on the Terrace of the Lustful—where else?

[Visit the Terrace.](#)

I had already spent ninety years in the flames. It took only ten to climb the lower terraces and be purged of my six other sins. Those early years were the worst. I had nothing in common with the souls I met—no friends among the sloths, profligates, gluttons, or enviers. But in these flames I feel at home. Here we, the “lustful according to Nature,” daily embrace the unnatural Sodomites who circle the

mountain in the opposite direction. They remind me of my old friends, Truc Malec and Raimon Durfort, with whom, in youth, I engaged in an obscene debate at the expense of a certain Lady Aymon.

On the seventh terrace there are two paths. Closest to the mountain wall the path is covered in fire, while the other, near the edge, stays cool and clean. I take care not to stray from the fire. But one afternoon, I noticed a few orange flames darkening to crimson. I looked toward the Western sky and saw, on the cooler path, a man standing with the afternoon sun behind him. He was casting a shadow as if still alive, which he was. I looked at him, ceased to feel the usual effect of fire on my skin, and understood that my body was an illusion, immune to pain.

The shadow-man addressed me with one of those figures that weaves a tortuous garland around its message. “The desire of his mind,” he said, “had prepared a gracious lodging for my name.” In plain words, who was I?

My heart (my real heart) began to burn and respond to the questioner in my own Occitan, but with words unlike any I’d spoken before:

*Tan m’abellis vostre cortes deman,*

Your courteous invitation so pleases me  
that I cannot and will not conceal myself from you,

It was not the old Arnaut Daniel who sang those bland, benevolent, and biteless verses. The old Arnaut prided himself on mixing confession with concealment, and could never have sung:

*Ieu sui Arnautz que plor e vau cantan.*

Yet it was true. I was weeping, singing and circling in a current of fellow souls.  
Where were the ox and the hare of my difficult love? Incredulous, I continued to  
speak words I had heard from a few fellow troubadours at the ends of their lives:

With sorrow I see my past folly ...

I had scorned and pitied them as limp old monks, but now I felt no scorn.

... joyfully I see the joy I hope for, tomorrow.

The word “Joy” I had sung before, but never “tomorrow,” never “hope”! For  
me Joy was now or never.

That day, I added my prayer to that of the others ... to be remembered by the  
pilgrim when he reached the end of his journey. Then, noticing that I’d moved out of  
the flames, I ended my plea and dropped back into the ardent stream. The poet  
would describe his last sight of me, “hidden ... by refining fire.”

Alighieri and I will not meet again. By the time he returns, shadowless, to this  
terrace to be shriven of his Lust, I’ll have risen to the place prepared for me—  
revolving, singing, gazing up from my seat in the circle of the Moon (a planet I never  
mentioned in my songs). A bath in Lethe will have erased all memory of the hare  
and the bull, of Truc Malec, of Lady Aymon and the others, all thought of my joys,  
treats, sins, poems, too ... drowned in a swell of hymns.

## POSTSCRIPT

We souls see into the future. Six centuries from now, my songs will be revealed to the New World by an ambitious young poet writing in the lingo of *yes*. He will attempt to renew that tongue. By giving his fellow poets lessons in *oc* and *si*, he will teach “The Spirit of Romance.” He will misread my signature line

*Ieu soi Arnaut che amas l'aura*

and write: “I am Arnaut who *loves* the air.” Absurd! If I’d loved plentiful, sweet air, I wouldn’t have chased the hare with a bull or swum against the current (he got those lines right.) It was the struggle to “*gather (amasar) the air*” and to grasp other unattainable objects that prompted all my poems.

## The Trouble with Arnaut Daniel

His match recall and switch game  
worms its way to your brain.

Beaks in a bush  
hone love to a nub.  
On chessboard—

Cheeseboard?—Sticks. Tropes.  
Ropes. Rules.

Sticks have souls. Uncle  
comes with the nails, says *Enter*,  
and seals my chamber.

*I am Arnaut!*  
cries  
the current. You

go mute or write:  
How to gather air  
without a net.

## Dante's One and Only Reason

*L'amor che nella mente mi ragiona ...*

Love that speaks its reasons in my mind ...

### *The New Life*

Things are reasons  
for names, bridges between  
the rose and the word

'suffuse.' A Verb  
caused Beatrice  
to cross the bridge in her crimson dress,

synonymous  
with Nine. Time  
tolled. The lad, stunned,

greeted her friend,  
Giovanna, and  
the occasion, Christ.

Eros, he knows, lives  
on a road to some  
Greek estate.

He chooses Caritas,  
naked child  
who furtively

consumes his heart.

Dante's *Vita Nuova* is the world's most famous *razo*.

[Visit "Vita Nuova"](#)

In it, the poet's verses—sonnets, ballads, *canzoni*—are embedded in prose passages that give the reason, *ragione*, or occasion, *cagione*, for each composition. The reason is often longer than the poem itself and makes as great a claim on a reader's attention. Dante's great innovation is to create his own *razo*, writing in a compelling and authoritative first person. Most of the poems receive, in addition to a *razo*, a prose analysis or explication, dividing the poem into sections and giving the theme of each. I think most readers skip these *divisioni*, finding them pedantic. Imagine an opera in which the singers paused after each aria to explain what key it's in, what tempo, how many stanzas it has, and what each one has to say.

But Dante dares interrupt himself this way, inviting us to read the *Vita Nuova* as a manual giving first-hand information about his own practice and development. It shows the steps by which one skilled love poet becomes *the* poet of "Love that moves the Sun and the Other Stars."

The first steps take us through Dante's earliest exchange of wordless greetings with Beatrice. The two are nine years old. From that moment until her death and beyond, she is his far love. Is he hers? We never learn. He writes for her some fairly conventional poems about the difficulties of love.

Ladies of the city notice that he pales, grows faint, and flees whenever he sees Beatrice. They ask "For what purpose do you love your lady when you cannot bear to be in her presence?" (a pithy formulation of far love) He answers "Ladies, the

purpose of my love used to be to gain this lady's greeting, the object of all my desires. But ever since it pleased her to deny it, my lord Love has placed my blessedness in something which cannot fail me." Asked what this new aim might be, he answers that it is "to write words that praise my lady." He has evolved a theme loftier than that of conventional love lyric with its laments, accusations, and pleas. His new resolve feels so new, so daring—perhaps too high an enterprise—that for several days he remains torn between his "wish to compose" and his "fear of beginning." Dante actually allows his reader to imagine him—of all poets!—stymied over a blank page. Not for long.

Soon he moves from the mere wish to the active will to compose, which takes his poetry to new and ecstatic heights. He addresses those who have an intelligent understanding of love (*"donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore"*). He speaks of angels. He speaks of bliss in the heaven to which Beatrice will soon be called. She is *"disiata in sommo cielo."*

Step Two begins after the death that he has foreseen. Dante grieves, and compares his grief to that of Jeremiah's over Jerusalem. Dante's whole city has been bereaved like a widow (*quasi vedova*), despoiled of every worthwhile object. In weeping he discovers a new and even more potent reason to write: "to vent his sadness in mournful words." As the reader has come to expect, he will have us read those words along with his commentary on them. But he makes a change in the procedure he has followed so far. As if newly afraid that a commentary after the poem may dilute its lyric force, he announces that he will now place the analysis

before the poem “in order that the song may remain more widowy [*più vedova*] at the end.” He follows the changed order—analysis, then song—for the remainder of his book.

The final movement and resolution are occasioned by another Lady. Dante’s physical appearance has become distorted by all his grieving. He sees a noble gentlewoman in a window. She’s observing him with pity. Grateful for her sympathy, he writes a sonnet praising her gentleness and discernment: “I realized you understood/ the nature of my dark life.” Then he begins to fear that he is becoming to attached to the new lady. He resolves to write a sonnet about this inner conflict, “*questa battaglia*,” between his far love and a possible near one. “Why,” he asks himself, “don’t you want to rescue yourself from such bitter tribulation?” A new sonnet resembles a troubadour debate, or *tenso*, between his soul and his heart. The heart defends “the new love spirit that responds to his desires.” But the heart, “adversary of reason,” is vanquished by a vision of Beatrice at the age of their first meeting, wearing the blood-red robes she wore on that momentous day. Dante is struck by the memory and by the history of his devotion. Now, all days spent contemplating a new love appear as so many days of delusion and shame.

The sympathetic lady drops, nameless and shadowy, out of the story. Dante consigns her to oblivion. Near love is defeated hands down and for eternity by the far one.

It may seem a cruel defeat (one that loomed over poetry for centuries!) but it occurs because of Dante chooses the best Reason for the best Poem. Far love wins

the battle, and he resolves to cease singing about any lady until such time as he can write for Beatrice “that which has never been written of any woman.” The rest, as they say, is *Commedia*.

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The following sonnet of mine is entitled “The Way Life Goes.” I shall give the analysis first in order that the end may remain more widowly. The sonnet’s turn, or *volta*, comes in line 9, “One time, she’s surprised,” which tells the exact moment when the near love described in lines 1-8 became a far one. Further divisions could be made, but I have already said too much.

On elbows and knees  
she takes the man in  
who feels like a baker  
the way he kneads.  
After a moan, a span  
of running around,  
mixing it up, ordering  
out. They resume.

One time, she’s surprised  
by two moans in a row, neither  
stronger than the other,  
nor more pained, it seems to her,  
than tears behind her lens  
when she walks against the wind.

## The Puddle-Razo

I've changed my mind. I have to add to "The Way Life Goes" a commentary that belongs in this essay on Reasons and Writing.

Until recently, I took the troubadour tropes with a grain of salt and other spices: "If love goes well, you sing." "If love goes badly, you sing even more." I supposed that one troubadour or another had written and sung this because he meant it, and then all the others went around singing the same thing in different ways. As for the razos—written by authors distant in time and space from the songs themselves—I enjoyed their commentaries as exercises in prose fiction, entertaining ways to misinterpret while claiming to explain. As for the *Vita Nuova*, I once dismissed the prose "libello" as a thin story concocted because Dante needed to organize a lot of love poems he had lying around, and because he preferred not to leave their interpretation in the hands of some hack razo-writer. I supposed he had selected 39 miscellaneous lyrics (some written for a girl named Beatrice, others not) and designated each one as a step toward his transcendent poetic goal. But the story itself and the psychic battle it described didn't grab me until my own life threw me back to his account of a choice, for reasons of poetic ambition, of far love over near.

I need to report that the poems in my first book, and nearly all my poems in this book, were written after the event described in lines 9 and 10 of "The Way Life Goes," an event that abruptly changed a four-year near love into an unending far one. It stuns me to realize that if I'm a poet at all, it's because of that event. I lost someone, and after that (*post hoc*) I wrote poems.

When Beatrice died, Dante was already a poet. So was Thomas Hardy when his Emma died, and, to cite one of my contemporaries, Donald Hall when Jane Kenyon died. It was no wonder their grief expressed itself in poems. But I was not a poet when my near love died. I had written, over preceding decades, a doctoral dissertation, a few articles on medieval literature, the libretto for an opera, a memoir of my mother's reminiscences, all those damned sestinas, and a number of translations. Besides that, maybe 10 poems. While he and I were together I wrote no poems, only funny verses for his birthdays. I'd pretty much laid aside that secret desire.

But a few weeks after the moment of radical separation, writing poems became, not a possibility but a necessity. Here's what it felt like.

A stream flows from our farewell,  
lands here, has nowhere else to spill  
and in the puddle lies the poem.

It was largely this conundrum that led me to make far love the theme of this long *razo*. To be sure, when my opportunity to grieve presented itself, it didn't feel like a choice. Bereaved people are conscripted against their will into a vast army. Though there are individuals who choose death, nobody ever chooses grief. It feels too awful. The widowed city is too denuded to be livable. *Vidua*, empty.

Yet when an unchosen grief became the occasion for poems—poems I had wanted all my life and not found—things got complicated. I wrote, in “The Peter Pan Bus Cycle,”

I love the poem almost more

than I loved you.  
If I had to choose  
never to have found the poems,  
and to have you back again,  
I am not sure what I would do.

Luckily I never had to choose, but there have been moments when I was reminded of that chapter in which Dante vows to stop writing about the living lady in order to devote himself to a beautiful ghost.

This is the place to mention that I have a new near love. I don't write poems for him. I spend hours and days, sometimes weeks, neglecting him in order to fish for poems in the puddle. I thank him, my *amor de prèp*, for not complaining. He knows the fishing is necessary. He knows what would happen if he asked me to leave the puddle and devote my thoughts only to him.

### **Just Like the Elephant**

Richard de Barbezieux, according to his *vida*, was fond of writing songs containing novel comparisons to animals and birds. We also hear that he was in love, though all we find out about his lady is that she was the daughter of Jaufre Rudel (the one who dies on the first page of this book) and was married to another Jaufre, Lord of Taunay. The following *razo* tells a tale of their love. Though written in simple language (much simpler than that of Richard's poems), it is hard to translate because the ladies in it have no names, and because there are so many clauses strung together with "and."

---

You have heard about Richard de Barbesieux, who he was, and how he fell in love with the wife of Lord Jaufre of Taunay. She was beautiful, noble, and youthful. He loved her beyond measure and called her Better-Than-Lady, and she loved him in a courtly fashion. Richard pleaded with her to give him the pleasure of her love and begged for her mercy. The lady responded that she would grant him as much pleasure as she honorably could, and, if Richard loved her as much as he claimed to, he shouldn't wish her to say or do more than she was saying or doing.

As their affair proceeded, a lady of the region, proprietress of a rich castle, sent for Richard, who came to see her. The lady began telling him how amazed she was at what he was doing—how he had long loved a lady who'd never granted him the pleasure of her love—and she said he was such a worthy man that all noble ladies ought to grant him that pleasure and, if he wished to separate from his lady, she herself would grant him the pleasure he asked. She added that she was more beautiful and noble than the lady with whom he was in love.

Thus Richard, hearing the fine promises she made, told her he would leave his own lady. She then demanded he go take leave of her right away, saying she would grant him no pleasure until she knew he had parted from the other lady.

And Richard went away, came to the lady he was in love with, and told her how he had loved her above all other ladies in the world, even more than himself, and now because she had never given him any pleasure in love he wanted to leave her. This saddened and dismayed her and she began to plead with Richard not to

leave, saying that, though she had not given him pleasure before, she would do so now. Richard answered that he wished to leave her as soon as possible, and he left.

Afterward, he went to the lady who'd told him to leave and said he had done what she commanded. He now begged for her mercy and asked her to fulfill her promise. The lady answered that he was not a man to whom any lady should grant her favors; he was the falsest man in the world to leave a lady as beautiful, gay, and loving as his, no matter what any other lady had asked him to do. What's more, she said, if he had left that one, he would leave another. When Richard heard her words, he was more sorrowful than he had ever been in his life. And he went away, and tried to throw himself on the mercy of the lady he'd parted from, but she didn't want him back. So, from the sadness of all this, he went off to the forest, had a house built, and lived in it as a recluse, saying he would not come out until his lady took pity on him, which is why he said in one of his songs:

*Better-than-Lady, whom I left two years ago ...*

And when the noble ladies and knights of the region saw Richard's terrible fate, they came to his place of seclusion and told him he should come out. And ladies and knights went to his lady and pleaded with her to pardon him. The lady answered that she would not do so until a hundred ladies and a hundred knights, all of them lovers, presented themselves to her on their knees, with prayerful hands, to beg her mercy, and then, if he wished, she would pardon him. The news reached Richard, which is why he wrote the song : **“Just like the elephant ...”** (*Atressi com l'olifant*) ...

**Just like the elephant**

Who, when he falls, cannot get up  
Until his fellows rouse him  
With their bellowing voices,  
I will follow suit.  
My misdeeds weigh on me so  
That if the whole court of Puy in all its glory  
Won't rescue me, I'll never be the same.  
I hope they'll beg mercy  
From the lady who counts  
My prayers and reasonings as nothing .....

---

This elephant business is not so silly. According to the bestiaries, elephants have no knees. When they sleep they must lean against a tree because if they lie down, they can't get up unless all their friends come and help them .



And right now it would take many elephants to lift me up. Two months ago, I was happily writing a book ... *Oh, Better-Than-Book that I left two months ago*. I was full of love for it, vowing on the way home from the MacDowell Colony to serve it faithfully until it was finished. Then came Thanksgiving and Owen with his wife and two fascinating teenage stepchildren. Then, Christmas and Malcolm with his bad backache, and Eulalia and Nellie insisting that he and Grandma Sarah take them to the Met Museum. After all these people had gone, I wrote a couple of poems unrelated to this book, and then went to Pennsylvania where something I wrote twenty years ago was put on stage, with music. Then I was full of shame at having let myself be seduced away from my memoir of far love. The things that seduced me are over now, and I could get back to work, but, because I abandoned the book, it has abandoned me. I can't find it or hear it telling me how to finish it and make it whole.

According to Pliny the Elder, *in Africk they catch Elephants in great ditches which they make for that purpose: into which, if one of them chance to wander astray from his fellowes, all the rest immediatly come to succor him; they heap together a deale of boughs, they roll down blocks and stones, and whatsoever may serve to raise a banke, and with all that ever they can doe, labour to plucke him out.* (Natural History, Book I)

We hear no more from Richard about his elephant. He abandons it and goes on to sing about two other animals and a bird.

And I am not at all like **the bear**,  
Who, if he's beaten is still esteemed, and pardoned.  
He recovers, fattens, returns ...

And if I could imitate

**The phoenix ...**

Who burns, then comes out whole,  
I would set myself on fire. I'm so ashamed  
Of my false, treacherous words ...

Better-Than-Lady, whom I left two years ago,  
I must return to you weeping and in pain

**Like the stag** who when he has run his course  
Comes back to die when he hears the hunters' cry ...

According to the raso—how likely is this?—when the ladies and knights heard Richard could receive his lady's mercy if a hundred ladies and a hundred knights, all lovers, went to plead with her and the ladies and knights assembled and went to see her.

On their knees (they had knees!) they asked her mercy, and she pardoned him.

Come Better-than-Elephants! Come Hunters. Pity your prey.

## IV. Women Troubadours

### A Paper Creature

In the small college French department where I spent 23 years, I often taught the first semester of a course called “French Civilization.” It was a survey for majors, most of them women, and I regretted that France’s Middle Ages, Renaissance, seventeenth century, and Enlightenment offered so few significant females to study—only a few regent-mothers of underage kings. French laws of succession precluded queens of consequence. More importantly, among canonical writers—La Fontaine, Molière, Voltaire, and the rest—I knew of only one exemplary woman poet. Every year I proudly trotted her out.

She was Louise Labe of Lyon, called *La Belle Cordière* because her father and husband were rope-makers. Her written corpus was small—three elegies, one prose *Debate Between Folly and Love*, and a cycle of 24 love sonnets. But a sonnet or two sufficed to demonstrate her mastery of echo and rhyme (“*Clere Vénus qui erre par les cieux...*”) and to point out her facility with the burning, freezing, wounding, soothing rhetoric of Petrarchan lyric. I invited students to admire her confident claim to the powerful and piteous role of woman/lover/poet.

We know that every animate being dies  
When the subtle soul is parted from the body.  
I am the body, you the better part.  
Where are you, then, beloved soul? (Sonnet VI)

and

If ever, during my mortal stay,  
I feel my eyes go dry, my voice  
Break, my hand become infirm

And my mind lose its capacity  
To speak as woman and as lover,  
I will ask Death to dim my clearest day. (Sonnet XIII)

The text I presented to the class with greatest satisfaction was a dedicatory preface addressed to a wealthy young bourgeoisie of Lyon. I so loved this letter that I compromised the soundness of my French course by translating the difficult Renaissance prose into English. In its opening flourish Louise declares that “the severe laws of men” no longer prevent women from being educated. They should, therefore, if they have the leisure, adorn themselves with letters, languages, music—ornaments less alienable than rich gowns, fine jewels, and gold chains. They should aspire to create more than mere needlework. They should prepare themselves to be companions of men not only in domestic matters but also in commercial and civic affairs. They should not try to surpass their husbands, only to challenge them, because up to now men’s superiority had come to them too easily, without their having to strive for it. I assured my students that this was brilliant feminist strategy in a woman of her time. I was always delighted when the day came to show the class her moving words.

But were I still responsible for the Civilization course, that day would no longer bring unmixed pleasure. In fact, I might have to omit Louise from the syllabus and substitute one of her male contemporaries—Ronsard, Du Bellay, or the abstruse Maurice Scève, her fellow Lyonnais. If I persisted in presenting the Beautiful Ropemaker, conscience would compel me to cite a new book, *Louise Labe: Une Créature de papier*, by Mireille Huchon (Droz, 2006). This *seizièmiste* argues that,

while a certain Louise Labe did live in Lyon in the 1550's, she may never have written a line. According to Huchon, Labe's sparse, strong, and oh-so-feminine writings may have been penned by a group of male poets including Olivier de Magny, once thought to be the lover she laments in her sonnets, and Maurice Scève, whose esoteric poems I have always found dry by comparison with Louise's passionate ones. It seems that a coterie of famous men may have perpetrated the hoax— composing lines in a woman's voice and ascribing them to a lady known in Lyon and beyond as a courtesan whose "whorish" mores had been castigated by John Calvin himself. Huchon does not offer a clear motive for the prank. Was it pure literary playfulness? Was it a means of expressing, or masking, the men's own femininity? Was their attitude to women admiring, envious, contemptuous, or merely cynical?

Huchon's hypothesis has received both praise and blame from fellow specialists, all of whom have found it, at the very least, learned and cogently argued. My amateur's grasp of the scholarly issues does not allow me to refute or confirm her view. If I were a less scrupulous teacher I could ignore the thorny questions and blithely continue to present Louise in her hallowed role as "France's greatest woman poet." But recently, in a dream, the issue arose, and I proved scrupulous with a vengeance,

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*I find myself attending a reunion banquet at the college. Around me, emeritus colleagues exchange fond classroom memories with their alumni while I sit brooding over my lack of such memories and wondering why I didn't insist on being seated next to my former*

*students—five girl majors and one boy minor clustered at the far end of the table. I try in vain to recall their names.*

*After stewing for a while, I speak up, addressing my far-off students so loudly that everyone has to cease their reminiscences and listen: “Tell me, did I teach you about Louise Labe?” They pipe up in answer: “Oh, yes, the Lyonnaise.” “And what do you remember about her?” Dutifully, they utter snatches of information. “She was a noble lady, une dame d’honneur.” “A poet.” “Les sonnets.” “She wrote a letter to another noble lady.” It is wonderful to hear how much they remember, if somewhat inaccurately. “And do you recall anything from the letter?” “Lift your eyes above the spindle!” “The severe laws of men,” they call out. Hearing my bright alumni respond, I am overcome with pride. And chagrin. And a perverse sort of glee. “Well, mes amis,” I announce, “Louise was no dame d’honneur. She was a prostitute, or meretrix as Calvin called her in his diatribe. But we’d be okay with that, wouldn’t we? It’s fine that Louise was not a noble poet; the problem is that she may not have been a poet at all.” And I proceed to explain Huchon’s theory. My waking self finds the hoax theory unsettling, but my dream self seems delighted with it. I announce the news about ‘la créature de papier.’ Instantly, the banquet table vanishes and I am in the cloakroom with the tallest and brightest of my majors. She and I embrace in a flood of affection. I feel not a shred of regret at having exposed a great woman writer as a sham.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Why not? What personal truths lie at the source the dream? For one thing, in my years as a college professor, it always seemed to me that one of my primary functions was to produce paper creatures of a sort, graduates whose place in the

world would be assured by transcripts, letters, diplomas—flimsy, equivocal documents like those that had guaranteed my own professional position. It had been paper (exams, compositions) that I required from my students, and paper (grades, recommendations) that they wanted from me in return. Beyond paper, who were we? I had neither known them, nor asked them to know me.

It had never occurred to me, for instance, to tell them that I too aspired to be a poet. I was spending anguished, ecstatic out-of-class hours trying to evolve a means of expression that would not only satisfy my own creative longings, but would also go out in the world and find an audience. In short, I hoped very much to become a paper creature myself. True, I would want to be more than that to my friends and loved ones, but with most people I would relish being remembered for a few good poems.

Of course, I would prefer that the work be written by no one but myself. Yet I always suspect that the self who writes my poems can't be known for certain by me or anyone else.

### **Bruckner et al.**

For a long time I didn't know there were any women troubadours. After I learned that there were, I didn't introduce them to my Civilization students because all troubadours wrote, not in French, but in Old Occitan, which I thought would lose most of its punch in translation. But then two friends persuaded me to collaborate

on an edition-translation, *Songs of the Women Troubadours* (Bruckner, Shepard, and White, Garland, 1995 and 2000).

I feel like a fraud to say I translated the trobairitz. I couldn't have done it alone but relied on my colleagues who are working medieval scholars, up-to-date on the specialized literature, well-versed in Romance Linguistics. Bruckner and Shepard could have completed the project by themselves, but invited me to join them because they think of me as a poet, and that flattering view made their invitation hard to resist.

It proved a happy, companionable project. Our book turned out well—especially the paperback edition with its red cover and preface by W.S. Merwin. Not that I'm all that happy with the poems themselves. The Countess of Dîa, in English, without rhymes or tunes, is a pale shadow.

She was deft at making difficult rhymes fit her music. In “*A Chantar m'er ...*,” her one song whose melody is known, the *-ia* (of *volria, amia, sia, cortesia*) clings sinuously to a repeated figure. I can draw it:

\*  
\*                    \*  
\*                    \*

and write ‘da-da-da-dum,’ but not convey its haunting effect. In our whole group of 36 songs, there are only a few lines that seem okay on the unmelodic paper:

And you, foul-tongued, jealous man,  
don't think I'll be slow  
to please myself with joy and youth  
just because it may upset you.     (Countess of Dîa)

I should never have the wish to sing  
because the more I sing  
the worse it goes for me in love (Na Castelloza)

... I cannot with my verses  
accomplish what I wish. (Clara d'Anduza)

Would to God the darkness were not ending  
and my lover were not leaving me  
and the watchman saw no day or dawn,  
O God, O God, the dawn. It comes so soon. (anonymous)

Yet a poetry book containing a few effective lines is not to be sneezed at. And I like more than a few of the original poems printed alongside. Even readers who don't know Occitan may know some Romance language well enough to get an idea of the "melopeia" (word-music) that got Ezra Pound so excited. That kind of back-and-forth reading was how Pound and many other troubadour fans, including me, acquired their first notion of Old Occitan, which has never been widely taught, even in graduate schools.

There are 36 songs in the book—more or less all the songs attributed to Occitan women. That's compared with 2500 or so attributed to men. The Contessa de Día, the best known trobairitz, is represented by only four songs, and the next best known, Na [Lady] Castelloza, by three. The other women in our book are credited with only one song apiece, or even less—a fragment, or part of a tenso.

Few trobairitz poems have razos. I have already given the reason for Lombarda's argument with Bernart Arnaut. But I'd like to read a razo that explains

why some trobairitz did NOT compose a song she had in her head, or why a song she did compose was not preserved, or was attributed to someone else. In the absence of a story like that, I invented one, based on two lines by Na Castelloza.

### **Woman Troubadour**

*... on mais chan  
e pieitz me vai d'amor.*

*The more I sing, the worse  
it goes for me in love.*  
My Friend carried a glove  
beside his skin—  
silk, feminine, a Lady's.

I stole it. He said:  
"You're pardoned  
if you'll sing your song."  
Joy spilled into a canzone:  
how I suffered,  
all I'd do to gain  
a small reward. God!  
May it come soon!

He took it in,  
taught the song  
to his Juggler, then,  
sent him off  
to one of those estates  
whose Lord is always gone—  
hunting, whoring, warring—  
and the Juggler rattled the gate.

"Come in. Come to my room,"  
the Lady cooed,  
and handed him a lute.

The Juggler stood in the luster  
of the Lady's mirror. A man may sing  
a woman's song by switching

here and there an end-word—‘Oh’  
for ‘Ah.’” and vice versa.

Listening,  
the Lady paled,  
pinked, flamed.

Urgently, she sent for the Juggler’s  
employer (my Friend) who came  
and garnered the reward.  
Etcetera. The worse it goes  
for me in love, the more I sing.

My name is Alamanda,  
Bietris, Carezza,  
Gormonda, Ysabella.  
I won’t grow old. In my whole  
life, I’ll compose three  
perfect songs and lose them all.  
I’ll shrink into a miniature  
red swoop—my gown and hood.

My pen, a centimeter.  
My eye, a dot, period.

I imagine that on the whole it was good to be a woman troubadour—to  
compose and hear one’s songs performed, to find a small audience attuned to one’s  
hints and gestures, to flower, then vanish like pale ink on parchment ...

*Bels dous amics ...*  
Fair, sweet friend, I can truly tell you  
I have never been without desire  
since I met you and took you as true lover,  
nor has it happened that I lacked the wish,  
my fair, sweet friend, to see you often,  
nor has the season come when I repented,  
nor has it happened, if you went off angry,  
that I knew joy until you had returned,  
nor ...

This fragment is by Lady Tibors. “Courtly and learned,” says her vida, “charming and extremely well informed ... she composed these couplets and sent them to her lover.”

**“The Little Trobairitz” (a School Play)**

*scene: window of a castle in Die, department of Drôme, Provence  
The very young Countess speaks with her Uncle and Guardian*

CD Uncle, I’m beautiful, of good mind, and good lineage. Will I marry a powerful lord?

U I’m working on it, Niece—we’re deep in negotiations.

CD With whom, Uncle and Guardian?

U Lord Guilhem de Poitou.

CD Guilhem the troubadour? Wonderful! *She begins to sing:*

*Farai un vers de dreit rien ...  
I’ll make a song from absolutely nothing  
... composed while sleeping  
and on horseback ...*

U That Guilhem’s dead, my dear. The Guilhem I’m talking to is his grandson. Other possibilities are his great-grandson, Guilhem, and his great-nephews, Guilhem and Guilhem. If they don’t work out, there’s a distant cousin also named ...

CD I see that Guilhem de Poitou is bound to be my husband. I think I’ll call him “Willy Nilly.” I wonder if I’ll love him. When I’m married, I would like to be in love.

U You will be, my dear, but not with Guilhem. You’ll love another knight— Lord Raimbaut d’Aurenga—whom you’ll meet at your wedding feast:

CD Raimbaut, the troubadour? *(sings)*

*Ara resplan la flor inversa ...*  
Now the flower blooms, inverted,  
On rocky ledge, on hilly slope.  
What flower? Snow, ice, frozen  
Rains that burn, torment, and slice ...

U Enough! That Raimbaut's too old. Your *amic* will be a young relation of his—fine horseman, I hear—not a bit musical.

CD But I am musical. I'll become a troubadour and compose many good songs about him! (*sings*)

*Sapchatz gran talan n'auria*  
*que.us tengues en luoc del marit ...*  
Be sure I'd have a strong desire  
to have you in my husband's place ...

U Ho! I see Lord Guillem is marrying a vixen! But you can't become a troubadour, Niece. You have to be a *trobairitz*.

CD Can a *trobairitz* strap on an instrument and ride out to other castles to sing?

U Certainly not! You can't trot around entertaining at feasts like a common *jongleur*. Not even a troubadour does that if he's well born.

CD But two troubadours—Arnaut Daniel and Gaucelm Faidit (the fat one)—were here just last month entertaining.

U That's because they needed the money. You will have enough money.

CD (*weeps*)

U Oy Niece. Having money is nothing to weep about!

CD It is if I can't go to courts and feasts.

U You can go, but you'll arrange for your songs to be performed by a *jongleur*. That's necessary in order to outwit the gossips.

CD Then how will people know the songs are mine? How will Raimbaut know they're for him?

U You can drop hints.

CD And he'll understand them? What if only the gossips understand them, and Raimbaut isn't even there?

U Then you'll arrange for a messenger to carry them to his estate and sing them there.

CD How lovely for him! And will he reward me with the devotion I deserve?

U I hope not, Niece, for if he does you won't compose your best-loved song.  
*(sings)*

*A cantar m'er de ço que non volria ...*  
I must sing of what I'd rather not ...

CD Oh! That's good. *(sings the rest of the stanza):*

I'm so angry about him whose friend I am  
for I love him more than anything;  
mercy and courtliness don't help me  
with him, nor does my beauty, or my rank, or my mind ...

\*  
\* \*  
\*

Da-da-da-dum ...

*Curtain*

## V. The Bridge of Spiders

### Endings

There are several ways to conclude a vida. Here are some examples.

#### **Jaufre Rudel**

... And thus he died in the arms of the countess. Afterwards, on that same day, she became a nun because of the grief she felt about him and about his death. And here are written a few of his songs.

#### **Na Castelloza**

... And she was a very gay and a very learned lady, and very beautiful. And here are written a few of her songs.

#### **Peire Rogier**

... He had great honor in the world as long as he stayed in it, and then he entered the order of Grandmont, and there he died.

#### **Peire de Valeira**

... and he composed poems such as were made at the time, of slight worth, about leaves and flowers and songs and birds. His songs had no great value, nor did he.

#### **Arnaut Daniel**

... But it was not believed that the lady gave him pleasure in love, which is why he says

I am Arnaut who gathers the air  
and hunts the hare with an ox

#### **Uc de Saint Circ**

... But he knew well how to express in his songs everything which happened to him because of them. But after he took a wife, he never composed songs.

This memoir of mine, like the commentaries of Guilhem de la Tor, is growing longer than the poems it pretends to explain. I plan to end it soon. I just need to mention two short trips to Occitania.

In the winter of 2004, I read about a village named Auvillar in Gascony.

[Visit Auvillar](#)

It claims to be *un des plus beaux villages de la France*, birthplace (with a plaque to prove it!) of the troubadour Marcabru. The Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, where I had done a residency, had acquired studios for painters and writers in Auvillar's old port. It sounded like a good place to go in Southern France —far enough from the family tomb, close enough to troubadours. I applied to the Auvillar program and got in. For four weeks in July, I would be working in Gascony. Before I left, though, two things happened.

The first was a momentous anniversary—June marked the fourth year since the death of my near-become-far love. Now the time of his absence equalled the time of his presence in my life. As a way of finding out what that meant, I wrote “The Peter Pan Bus Cycle,” which seemed to conclude a sequence of poems begun in 2000. I wrote

The poem that going away you made  
keeps reappearing on the page,

but I was afraid this crown of sonnets might be the last thing I'd write for a long time. And here I was going to France to write. That made me nervous.

A week before my departure, I met a man who, I thought, might become another near love, and that made me even more nervous. The old love had given me all those poems. Would having a new one cancel my contract with him? Would I gain a love only to lose a Reason?

This is what I wrote that July.

## Two Poems and a Razo

One summer, a widowed poet traveled to the village of Auvillar hoping the ghost of its troubadour Marcabru would help her find new songs. On the third day of climbing steep streets and gazing from various points at the Garonne, she said to herself: “Neither Marcabru nor the limpid light of Occitania has inspired any verse. Maybe I should return to New York where I have a friend who would console me on days when I don’t find poems.” Musing as she wandered near the Gendarmerie, she saw a marker that gave Auvillar’s old Roman name, and when she returned to her lodgings, she composed this “Vernacular Song”:

The birds of *Alta Villa*  
no longer sing in Latin.  
High over the Garonne,  
a garrison has fallen,

but charming *Auvillar*,  
in dahlias and hydrangeas,  
steps down to the Garonne,  
to a port

that holds no boats,  
only Brits and cats.  
Along the proud Garonne,  
commerce has been lost

to the autoroutes.  
Waters  
of the green Garonne  
are altered. All things change.

Only my love  
does not, and won’t  
until Garonne  
flows up into the mountains.

The last stanza took the poet by surprise as if she'd found it floating down the river in a bottle. "Which love do I mean?" she wondered. "The old one? the new one? If that's how I feel about him, I'd better go home right away! Then again, had I been home I wouldn't have written this. Maybe I should stay and see what else floats by."

She stayed, and as there wasn't much to do in the evenings, she and her artist would walk across the river. The busiest night life in Auvillar took place on

### **The Bridge of Spiders**

People used to fish  
on the Garonne,  
but industry has risen  
through the moon-  
light into these girders  
lit by incandescent lamps.

Thousands of leggy workers  
mend and weave their nets  
in time for the hunt.  
Between the aerialists  
and their victims  
affinities exist. Webs

and midges mesh,  
like fishermen and fish,  
continual darts  
of light! Arachnids  
entertain us, though they don't  
mean to. We look through

frail geometries and think  
how handsome the fabric,  
how homely the spiders,  
the tipsy polygons  
aren't doilies but death-traps  
set in the night.

Next day, we find

the factory abandoned.  
Filaments, uneaten morsels,  
hang in mid-air. Where  
*is* everyone? Where  
are they sleeping it off—

the effort, the feast?

“Not thousands!” said Mary, when she heard the poem. “Millions!”

(The chums were taking another walk over the bridge.)

“And they wouldn’t be here,” said Steve, “if humans hadn’t learned how to build a steel structure and light it with electricity ...”

“... attracting bugs that attract spiders,” Mary added.

“Where *would* they be?” asked Virginia.

“They wouldn’t be anywhere. They only exist—this many, at least— because of us!” was Mary’s sobering reply.

Janet changed the subject: “We’re all spiders this summer.”

“How so?” asked the Poet.

“Didn’t you say you were going to stay and see what comes down the River? That’s what spiders do. They spin structures from stuff in their guts without knowing which webs will catch anything, or what the catch will be.”

“Right,” said Mary. “It could be a fat moth. It could be some dry leaf. They can only make the patterns, and wait to see what happens.”

The Poet alluded to the story of Arachne, over-ambitious artist who became the first spider. And the chums all thought silently: “Could that happen to me?”

“Then again,” said the Poet, “there’s Walt Whitman’s Spider. I loved that poem when I was a kid, but never thought I’d be inside it.”

“How does it go?”

“The poet sees *A Noiseless, patient spider ... on a little promontory, launching forth filament, filament, filament ...* He sees himself:

... in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing,—seeking the spheres to connect them;  
Till the bridge you will need be form’d—till the ductile anchor hold;  
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my Soul.

“That’s beautiful,” someone said, “but none of these spiders are musing.”

“No. Neither was the spider in the poem. She was an ordinary arachnid trying to catch food. She noticed another spider on the promontory watching her and didn’t know it was the Soul of Walt Whitman.”

That was July, 2004, just before my return to New York.

## **Other Spiders**

In May, 2005, I found myself in France again, in Toulouse on the Rue du Taur (“Bull Street”). In 1955, Paul Blackburn, New York poet and troubadour translator, named a poem after this street. My own “**Rue du Taur**” begins:

I have been here before  
and didn’t like it.  
I’m here again.  
What am I looking for

in narrow stores  
that sell crystallized violets  
and pastel candles? ...

I was looking for the Centre de Ressources Occitanes et Méridionales (CROM) and its Director, François Pic, whom I'd met in Auvillar 10 months before. François presides over a cavernous library on the Rue du Taur, a benevolent spider who attracts writers, researchers, musicians, and others into a widening network of Occitanophiles. Thanks to my connection with women troubadours, he had come with his wife to meet me in Auvillar, taken me on an excursion to Romanesque Moissac, treated me to a delicious lunch, and plied me with books of modern Occitan poetry, though I didn't pretend I could read them. By way of thanking him, I'd sent him poems, including the Auvillar songs and *razo*, and he'd forwarded the work to friends who edit *OC*, a Toulouse review devoted to Occitan letters.

[Visit "ocrevista".](#)

To my surprise, the poems appeared on its pages. The poems were in English and I doubted that many people would read them, but François had introduced the work with a genuine *vida*, a paragraph of Occitan prose that altered the course of my life. It was a portrait of someone I wanted to meet ...

*Sarah White ... una poeta americana qu'a passada la vida demest los libres en lengas romanicas ...*

Through the veil of a half-known language, I saw myself as I might appear to an admirer *de lonh*—not a Countess of Tripoli, but perhaps a Lady Lombarda—

“gracious, fair, ... and learned, who could compose well, and make beautiful, amorous verses,” who lived in New York on the banks of a river as storied as rivers on the Map of France. *A la fin de son sejour dins lo vilatge natal de Marcabrun, confessarà: “Garona es devenguda, tal coma l’Hudson, un de mos flumes interiors.”* Garonne had become, like the Hudson, one of her interior waterways, and she had brought a measure of—good heavens!—“joy” to Occitania ... *lo gaug de descobrir una ... votz singulara que per delà l’ocean nos unis.*

I wished the vida could come true. I wrote thanking François and his colleagues for their interest and asking if any of them might like to collaborate with me on translations of their poetry. If so, I could submit their work to American journals and return the compliment they had paid me in their venerable review. No sooner e-mailed than done. Poets were convoked, and off I went to meet them, leaving my near love behind in New York.

Now, on the Rue du Taur, I feared that the poets would be disappointed (as would I!) not to meet the heroine of François’ vida, the intrepid poet-translator. She, having spent “a lifetime among books in Romance Languages,” would master another Romance Language overnight, translate their work, publish it, and win them an audience in far-off New York. As I made my homesick way along the cobblestones, this intrepid poet-translator was nowhere to be seen.

## Several Vidas

### Saint Sernin

Saturninus (Sernin), first bishop of Roman ‘Tolosa,’ was arrested in 250 A.D. at the Capitolium, or administrative center. When he refused to pay the required homage to Roman deities, his feet were strapped to a maddened bull, who dragged him to his death. (The poor bull was slaughtered, too, in honor of those Roman gods.) A fine basilica rises on the site where Sernin’s body was recovered and buried, and the Rue du Taur marks the short path of his martyrdom, from the present-day Capitole to the basilica with its *clocher*—a slate spire sits atop five hexagonal galleries, gracefully stacked like a brick and plaster wedding cake. The street is lined with souvenir shops, cheap eateries, bookstores, a cinémathèque, a bar called “La Cave Poésie,” and a sprawling edifice housing a few university programs, and CROM.

I have been here before  
and didn’t like it  
but I’m here again.  
What am I looking for

in narrow stores  
that sell crystallized violets  
and pastel candles? At one end  
of Rue du Taur

rises the basilica, a martyr’s  
tomb, rose and cream, a “Circuit  
of Holy Bodies”  
in its ambulatory  
conceals a crystal flower  
I’ve sought and missed—  
true fragment of my own  
body, on Rue du Taur.



One of the poets I met at CROM that day was Jean-Pierre Tardif, whose Occitan poems are published under the name

**Joan-Peire Tardiu.**

Editor of *OC*, and teacher of French literature, he was born in 1954 in the hills of Haut-Agenais, northwest of Toulouse. His father's family came from Central France, and only French was spoken in his home, but local people spoke the language of Oc. When Jean-Pierre was around 14 he began to write in "the only language close enough and distant enough to let me speak of my relation to the world." He has travelled and learned languages in Europe and Africa, expanding his world beyond the region where he began to write, but when he looks within himself for the larger world, it comes to him in Occitan, "in fragments" and "from distance to distance." The poems he gave me are filled with spaces and disappearances.

<i>las causas</i>	<i>òm sap pas ont</i>	things	no one knows where
<i>amb</i>		with	
<i>lo vent</i>		the wind	
	<i>de finir</i>		that ends
	<i>al ras del lisadís</i>		in a slipping away

Luckily, the collection he gave me includes French translations. In comparing the translated title, *L'Absence de la mer*, with the original *La Mar quand i es pas* ("The Sea When It Isn't There"), one begins to grasp differences between the two languages. I'm not at all sure I understand Jean-Pierre's poems, but I think their

disappearances reflect threats to the rural French landscape itself, and to the poet's chosen tongue.

France has never been hospitable to minority languages. Over centuries, Paris has sent brutal crusades, royal edicts, harsh schoolmasters, strict bureaucrats, and talky TV programs to insure that Occitan would become, and remain, a minority language. Though this relentless campaign has never silenced the language, those who love it—like advocates of wolves, whales, and manatees—remain ever watchful against attrition, ever mourning their vanished Old Ones. Just after I left Toulouse, Bernart Manciet, *OC's* long-time editor-in-chief, died at the age of 83. In him Jean-Pierre lost not only a friend and mentor but an encyclopedia of Occitan lore and language. Here is another poem from *La Mar quand i es pas*.

the wind gnaws the days  
as centuries  
gnaw the stones  
into darkness  
houses down to fire-level  
winter gathering  
there water then water forgotten  
wind falls  
on the roads  
the expanse  
in the hard glow of night  
the sharp cold  
and the gnawing  
thoughts

As *OC's* new editor, Joan-Pèire does not want to be among the last Occitan poets.

It's a good thing there is Olivier Lamarque.

## Olivier

is very young and very tall. He was born in 1974, in Orly, near Paris, where nobody spoke Occitan, except his Southern grandfather, who taught him a few words. He himself did not speak it fluently until, at age 20, he purposely learned and adopted it. He told me he hoped I wouldn't ask him why he writes in Occitan. (I promised I wouldn't if he didn't ask me why I proposed to translate poems written in a language I didn't know.) He seems to have learned it in order to speak with friends his own age in his grandfather's language. He seems to relish using a rare, historic tongue, one he and his friends can defend against the march of homogeneity.

Olivier teaches in a Calandreta, one of several private elementary schools where instruction is bilingual. I visited his sixth grade class and talked to the kids—in French, of course, though they read me poems they'd written in Occitan. Olivier told me that none of his students' parents speak Occitan, only their grandparents. Next year, the children will go to an all-French *collège* where they'll lose their second language unless they make a concerted effort to keep it. I'm sure they would if Olivier were there. He is a good teacher, and a good poet. Joan-Peire praises the way his poems “take risks, renew our vision, propose astonishing leaps.”

### *Un curiós adissiatz*

*polida musica de maridatge, òme negre,  
dos sòmís que s'encontran,  
—quicòm deuriá venir vertat—*

### **Hello and Goodbye**

lovely wedding music, dark man,  
two shadows meet,  
—something should come true—

*coma de sagèls bizantins, de passarilhas*

like Byzantine seals, like raisins

*lo pitre conflat, entre lèrba jauna,  
cavi encara per ela  
totjorn per ela*

with swollen breast, in yellow grasses  
I still dig for her  
always for her

When I met Olivier, he hadn't yet published a book of poems, so there were no French translations. While I was in Toulouse, he helped me find literal English equivalents, and since I've come home, we've worked on my versions by e-mail. His poems aren't mysterious in the same way as Joan-Peire's and don't, as far as I can see, have anything to do with a vanishing language.

Olivier loves the poems of Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson. His translations of their poems have appeared in *OC*, of which he, too, is an editor. His first book is out now, with French translations. It's called *L'amor es un orquèstra blanc que ne somián los gosses*, "Love is a white orchestra that the dogs dream about."

### **The blue mask**

The blue mask  
of the great bimbo  
When the shock wore off  
I stood mute

### **Jaumes/Jacques Privat**

another editor of *OC*, is a good friend of Joan-Pèire's. He was born in 1953 in Aveyron, near Conques. He's a painter and sculptor, and in his poems words become materials

to be worked with like pigment or modeling clay.

<i>l'ocra del carretal</i>	ochre pathway
<i>trenca al mièg</i>	cuts through the middle
<i>d'a fons las pradas</i>	from down in the meadows
<i>prenon sa realitat las pradas</i>	meadows made real
<i>pel desir suau d'èstre dins tu</i>	by their wish to be in you
<i>d'èstre dins tu las pradas</i>	to be in-you meadows

His meadows, stones and skies have wishes that resemble human ones—to be fed, touched, sheltered from the sun:

<i>luna dels</i>	moon of
<i>jorns esbrenats</i>	crumbled days
<i>dubèrta poma d'amor</i>	love-apple open
<i>entre tu e l'ochava</i>	between you and hot noon

Of the three poets, Jaumes is the one who most reminds me of the troubadours.

There is some Arnaut Daniel in these lines:

<i>torna-me</i>	return to me
<i>se te'n vas</i>	if you go away
<i>e torna</i>	return
<i>garganta a la nuèch</i>	with your breast
<i>deliura</i>	open to night
<i>e t'agacherai</i>	and I'll watch you
<i>pel fengisclet</i>	through the keyhole
<i>la lausa</i>	the slate
<i>nos farà caud</i>	will warm us
<i>d'una limpada</i>	with your slipping in
<i>me farai</i>	you'll make me
<i>clau</i>	a key
<i>e tu</i>	and you
<i>sarralha</i>	a lock
<i>acacholats</i>	both of us
<i>pauc a cha pauc</i>	bit by bit
	hidden

The poets I met on the Rue du Taur greeted me and plied me with reams of poems. I thought they must be imagining the intrepid, itinerant poet-translator whom I myself had hoped to meet there, the one who would spread the fame of their beautiful language in America and help them save it from extinction. I dreaded their disappointment when they found out the truth—that in time I might translate a mere handful of their songs, and frame these modest razos.

I did promise to study the beautiful language, and I thank Joëlle Ginestet, who teaches Occitan at the University of Toulouse, for her helpful suggestions.

When, after

ten days, I returned to New York, I brought

everyone's e-mail address, without which our work could not proceed,

the Alibert Occitan-French dictionary François gave me,

*Los Vèrbs Conjugats* and other teaching materials Joëlle gave me,

reams of poems Olivier, Jaumes, and Joan-Peire gave me,

CD's—children's songs, music by the reggae-rapper “Fabulous

Trobadors” and

Marseilles' “Massilia Sound System,” and the sunny voices of the Assimil

language

Method:

*Diga-me, l'amic, l'occitan qu'es aquò?*

*L'occitan, es la lenga del miègjorn de la França, la lenga de l'Occitània.*

*[miègjorn—South]*

*Perqué la parlas?*

*Perqué es ma lenga ... es bèla e plan celèbra.      [plan—very]*

*(Alain Nouvel, Primeira leiçon, L'Occitan sans peine, Méthode Assimil)*

These, alas, are the only Occitan voices I hear in New York. I can't find any others. As months go by, the friends I met on Rue du Taur seem very far off. We exchange cordial e-mails—translations, poems, announcements of readings, concerts, new books, and pictures of Alice, Olivier's new baby.

*Adieu, Alice.*

*Adieu* (“A-dyoo”) means Hello and Good-bye.

*Adieu, Olivier, Jaumes, Joëlle, Joan-Peire, Francès.*

*Pensi soven a vos—bonas aranhas ...*

**Two Poets Lost as in New York  
I Study Their Language**

1.

News is posted on the Web:  
Bernard Manciet is dead.

I never met him,  
haven't read him  
yet, but I've read lines  
by Max Rouquette  
about the spider  
who sets his net  
in a stream of *clar*  
*de luna* and thinks  
the woven web  
turns constellations  
pale with respect.

Noiseless patient stars  
embrace Manciet  
tonight. A meteor  
ignites the shed  
where my hens  
put eggs in sweet  
straw nests.

Bernard Manciet (1923-2005)  
Max Rouquette (1908-2005)

2.

Teeth fall out—ripe teeth  
that won't bud

in the mouth again.  
We needed them

to frame sound  
and stop fuel spills.

The moon will send  
no tide this month.

Winds  
in a vacant web

weep  
*Roqueta Rouquette*

**Cançon de l'aranha, Max Rouquette**

[Visit Max Rouquette](#)

**Spider Song**

L'aranha dau calabrun  
calabrun e calabruna  
cala au vèspre son filat,  
pèr prene lo clar de luna  
Fa de tela  
son estèla  
e crèi que ne paliran  
las ensenhas dau cèu grand ...

The spider of dusk—  
brother dusk, sister dusk—  
sets his net in the evening  
to catch the moonlight.  
With a web  
he makes his star  
and thinks it pales  
constellations in the wide sky ...



The heroine of the vida thinks of her friends. They think of her. But if she fell into a pit they'd be too far off to hear her call, much less come lift her out.

They are in France with their near loves. She is in New York with hers.

... and here are written a few of her songs.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Six Words and Several Flowers” first appeared in *The Village Voice*.

The following poems appear in *Cleopatra Haunts the Hudson: Poems* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2007)

“Across the Tree ...,”

“In Montreal, a Professor of French Goes Mad

“Julia Willems, Her Son at War”

“The Peter Pan Bus Cycle”

“The Sea Bird”

“Woman Troubadour.”

“A Paper Creature” appeared in PN (Poetry Nation)

“Woman Troubadour,” “Two Poems and a Razo,” and “Two Poets Lost as in New York I study their language” appeared in *OC*, Toulouse review of Occitan letters

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