

**SHORT STORIES  
AND  
EXCERPTS IN TRANSLATION  
2010**

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*Personne* (excerpt)

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Viviane Hamy/ Words Without Borders

# SHORT STORIES

# Esprit de Corps/

STORY FROM THE COLLECTION *ENFANTS DE LA BALLE*

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Douglas dreams of music from his past. He still hears voices singing classical lyrics from his boarding school years. Carried away by the dark reminder of his former school's rite of initiation, he listens to his old vinyl and reflects on the meaning of his youth. *Esprit de corps* follows the music in Douglas's life, from his early years in the chorus to his wedding day.

**Author: Mark Carl Behr**  
**Originally written in English**  
**Publisher : Lattes**  
**Publication : 2010**  
**Word count: 4,700**

**Mark Carl Behr** was born in 1963 in Tanzania. He grew up in South Africa and attended the Drakensberg Boys' School for two years. His debut novel, *Die reuk van appels* (*The Smell of Apples*, St. Martin's Press, 1995), appeared in 1993 and won several prizes, including the CNA, Eugene Marais, and M-Net prize. His second novel, *Embrace* (Abacus, 2000), was short-listed for The Sunday Times award in South Africa as well as the Encore Prize in the U.K. Behr is currently assistant professor in world literature and creative writing at the College of Santa Fe in New Mexico.

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Bits of dream clung to Douglas's memory as he deactivated the alarm and went down the passage quietly so as not to wake Janey who was an even lighter sleeper than he. At Emma's door he paused for a moment; he listened at Peter's across the hall. He turned the kitchen light on and then off again before making his way to the fridge for a long gulp from the milk carton. The pinewood bench of the breakfast nook creaked as it took his weight and he let out a sigh that had been waiting since he'd forced his way up out of sleep and away from the dream. Above the washbasin the electronic clock showed the time and for a while he sat in the dark staring at it, hoping that tiredness would overcome him. He felt irritable at the prospect of the sleepless hours between now and dawn, of being dull during the long day's encounters with clients. Wide awake, he turned on the light.

It was futile to go back to bed only to toss and turn until Sophia came in and commenced the breakfast bustle. He'd make a cup of coffee and see to paperwork, accounts and bills that were long overdue. His bare elbow brushed against a stack of Emma's homework books. They'd recently been told she suffered from a learning disability. But what his daughter might have short in natural ability she made up for with sheer tenacity. While Peter remained near the top of his class — in spite of hours on the sports field or sprawled in front of the TV — Emma spent night after night at the kitchen table, trying until she managed to get things right or committed to memory. With his forearms on the cool table's surface and his hands resting on his daughter's dictionary, Douglas allowed his attention to drift back to the dream. By voices alone, even as he slept, he'd known where it came from. A time he was a teenager, a few years younger than his children were now. Fully at his waking senses, seated where his family would gather at dawn, images came to him of youngsters gathered between the school's arches, not quite singing as they were in the dream, instead chanting, almost shouting, with their attention aimed into the quad. What he saw clearly, awake, was himself in that chorus, a picture he'd evaded by willing himself out of sleep. Once, years ago, with colleagues after a second or third bottle of wine, when everyone was outdoing one another with stories of how they had survived the petty cruelties of school and the military, he'd reported the incident, lying that it was he in the quad, and exaggerating with some impressive number the push-ups he'd been forced to do.

What had brought on the dream or had taken him back there now, after all this time? Snatches of a news bulletin or documentary he'd overheard last night while Peter was channel surfing before bed, came back now; about a woman, an athlete perhaps, or women, he wasn't sure of the number, somewhere, suspected of witchcraft or spreading disease who were bound and gagged by a mob who set them ablaze in a pile of tires.

He cleared his throat and with the milk tasted garlic, from the olive oil and lemon juice dressing Janey liked over green salad with dinner. Garlic and lemon alone, she was sure, kept her family free of colds and flu. Douglas would have to floss and brush thoroughly, or otherwise risk sharing the reek with the day's clients. There were two appointments, both in neighbouring suburbs. One was a follow-up on short-term insurance for a wealthy client's collection of jewellery, a mere formality to sign off on documents. The other was a life-insurance policy with a skittish young trust-fund family; not quite secured, that would demand his full attention and keenest skills of diplomacy. He did not wish to lose the substantial commission.

On road trips in the old Renault, while they courted each other, Douglas had at times sung to Janey. Seasons in the Sun and Bridge over Troubled Water, were the songs she liked most. Or the theme song from Love Story. Conventional tunes. It was on their road trips, while still getting to know him that she discovered his clear baritone and ability to carry a tune perfectly had been formed in part while he was a student at the exclusive school for boys who could sing. In the early years Janey kept at him to use his voice. 'Singing is good for the spirit,' she said. 'May our kids be blessed with your voice, not mine.' [...]

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# The Wolves of the Atlantic/

STORY FROM THE COLLECTION *NOUVELLES VOIX D'AFRIQUE*

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In Niodior, on the coast of Senegal, a man runs for his life, pursued by angry men from the village threatening to make him “eat his balls for his last meal.” The narrator follows the chase and, overhearing bits of the conflict, remembers her father who never came back.

**Author: Fatou Diome**

**Translator: Helen Dickinson**

**Publisher: Hoëbeke**

**Publication : 2002**

**Word count: 1,230**

**Fatou Diome** was born in 1968 in Senegal. At 22, she moved to France, to pursue a doctorate in Modern Literature at the University of Strasbourg. Her first novel, *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (Anne Carrière, 2003; *Serpent's Tail*, 2004), was excerpted in *The Penguin Anthology of Contemporary African Writing*, published in May 2009. Her other works include the novel *Kétala* (Flammarion, 2006) and a collection of short stories entitled *La Préférence Nationale* (Présence Africaine, 2001).

// Wolves of the Atlantic, by Fatou Diome

A young man still, he runs past me as fast as an arrow. He runs. The dust follows him. He runs farther, following an invisible line that cuts the village in two. Suddenly he hesitates, takes one step to the right, one to the left, stumbles, falls, pivots abruptly, measures the distance between himself and the crowd chasing him, and gets up. But to do what? To live! Yes, to try and live. His eyes tell him he has no choice. So he resumes his race towards nowhere, towards life.

I'm afraid of his harried look, of the burning and gasping breath that brushed against me. I'm afraid for him, as he runs towards nothing, towards everything.

On the main street of Niodior, Dinguaré, the pursuers stream by in waves, dragging along with them all those who trust the strength of their biceps and their calves. As determined as mercenaries, boys with nerves of steel armed with bludgeons, stones, and machetes, hurl words of hatred like fireballs in the marathon runner's path. I step back, huddle against a fence. The mob passes before me, led by a cousin of my mother's. This last shouts the man's sentence: "If they catch him they will drag him naked through the village, pull out all his nails one by one, castrate him, and serve him his testicles as a last meal, then kill him like a dog, bludgeoning him to death."

I want to hear all, to see all. So I run as fast as I can, keeping behind them. They promise him a thousand barbaric acts, because, they cry, the man is impious. Some years back, this stranger had dared to take the virginity of one their own, and to leave her with child, a bastard. The crime is now bygone, and the shamed girl since married, but anger still simmers in attics. The arrival of the despised father has ignited the village, turning it into the tornado now tearing up all the barriers that civilization had strived to erect between Mankind and his hatred.

The man runs. He can't hear the words of his furious judges, but the deaf sound of their feet gives rhythm to the beat of his heart, confirming his plight. Man is a wolf unto man! Greetings, Hobbes! To you I offer a pagan amen to the transmigration of the soul! Come back soon as a dolphin and you will see the skeletal remains of love, the girl-mothers drowned with their lovers and their babies in the belly of the Atlantic.

He runs still. He has been turned into prey, knows he is prey. He wants to be an opossum and feign death to escape the hunters who poison Cupid's arrows. They're here!

The man climbs a fence and lands in the courtyard. The crowd does the same, and the fence collapses. They all fall down. Is God barring the path of the very regiment who claims to act in his name? The women chatting in the courtyard scream and run in all directions. The fugitive manages to get out and heads to the west. This is not the direction one would face to pray, but this it is the way he goes to seek salvation. To the sea. [...]

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# LOVE/

STORY FROM THE COLLECTION *SELON TOUTE VRAISEMBLANCE*

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**Author: Laurent Graff**  
**Translator: Linda Coverdale**  
**Publisher : Le dilettante**  
**Publication : 2,010**  
**Word count: 540**

The short stories in *In All Likelihood*, Laurent Graff's latest book, each involve a disappearance or an appearance . . . or something in between. His stories contain the absurd and the downright improbable and are full of allegory and symbolism.

A customer in a department store, in the opening story, is not really a shopper; he's there to rate the level of customer service. His job completed, he proceeds to leave the store but finds that he's trapped. In the next story, a stillborn fetus discusses his near-life experience, and in another, the world as we know it is flipped over and around by the absence of love and the notion that death suddenly no longer exists. Not only people and beliefs disappear: In one story, a woman's last name, at first impossibly long, gradually erodes; in another, an archivist gradually loses everything he has called his own, even his hair. Then there is the man who eats himself to survive. And in the story *Mausoleum* a string of disappearances drives a reporter to follow the trail of a man last seen on a highway. He discovers that people from around the world are suddenly abandoning their tasks . . . and bringing what they have in their hands to add to a growing pile of stuff, a monument, some say, of random objects.

**Laurent Graff** is the author of several works of fiction, including *Les Jours heureux* (Happy Days, Carroll & Graf, 2004; Le dilettante, Prix Millepages, 2001). Film rights to Happy Days have been optioned by Johnny Depp for Parliament Pictures/Warner

// Water, wind, earth, fire, and love.

Love had vanished. Like a first matter, it had been exhausted. The last couples had parted, quietly, painlessly, by mutual agreement. One after the other, they had faced the facts: whatever had brought them together had suddenly ceased to exist. Confusion now reigned in their memories; the bonds between them seemed at present inexplicable. What were they doing together? They had become strangers, neighbors somewhat at a loss. Men and women could be seen in the street, with suitcases, going away. Moving vans, parked in front of houses and apartment buildings, carried off the belongings of a life. People took rings from their fingers to set them down on convenient pieces of furniture. They stared at photos in amazement: They did not understand.

People lived without love. Feelings gave way to a practical regime, where the useful held sway. The other person had to best serve our interests and was valued accordingly. A system of partnerships and exchanges sprang up, based on the objective profitability of others, their economic clout, their social skills, their sexual stamina and talents, their fitness for a clearly defined happiness. People looked for such and such a partner, not always successfully. Chance and luck were obsolete; destiny had been demoted to a dead religion.

Egotism, once held in low esteem, became a fundamental value, eminently respectable, like a form of courtesy toward oneself. Extremes of narcissistic behavior developed, going so far as to reject all idea of intimacy with the other. Learned theses announced that sex with someone else was unnatural, and proclaimed the virtues of self-pleasuring. The word “sovereign” showed up everywhere as the guarantee of self-sufficiency: freedom, success, and authenticity. The individual emerged as the basis and the summit of society, the supreme point of reference, the uncompromising standard of humanity.

Ignored, inconceivable, death disappeared. For death meant the end of the world, so true was it that the world existed only through oneself. The acceptance of death demands great humility; people found it simply impossible to resign themselves to that. We preferred to keep quiet about our deadly fate and live on in a feeling of blind eternity. Our well-being was at stake! Public opinion shifted from death to the all-powerful present moment, sole judge, the incontestable proof of life: As long as I am alive, I am not dead. As for the deaths of others, that was no concern of ours. That didn't prove a thing. That was surely a reflection of some subsidiary necessity.

Love and death had vanished. In short, we were living in an ideal world, free from pain and care. The few questions we did ask ourselves always received immediate and quite comprehensible answers. As the relic of an ancient age, God became a nebulous and spell-binding figure with many picturesque incarnations. Religion recast itself as a leisure-time activity, offering multimedia masses, musical spectacles, and huge festive gatherings. Learning how to work a room, priests turned into DJs, showmen with their own impresarios. Monasteries recycled themselves as bed-and-breakfasts for passing tourists, while the monks sold their jams and jellies in supermarkets.

Now and again a man or woman was found hanged, at home, in the kitchen. We cut them down.

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# Home and Away/

STORY FROM THE COLLECTION *ENFANTS DE LA BALLE*

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It's a night when nothing goes right. He was supposed to celebrate a new business deal with his American partner, but after a few drinks, a street kid tries to steal his wallet. His partner wants him to turn the feverish thief over to the police, but he decides to let him go. And then the city, and its inhabitants with their paler-than-his skin, and even his friend, start to show their true colors.

**Author: Jamal Mahjoub**

**Originally written in English**

**Publisher : Editions Lattes**

**Publication : 2010**

**Word Count: 4,574**

**Jamal Mahjoub's** novel *Traveling with Djinn*s (Chatto & Windus, 2003) was awarded the Prix d'Astrolabe at the prestigious Etonnants Voyageurs festival in France. His most recent works include *The Drift Latitudes* (Chatto & Windus, 2006) and *Nubian Indigo* (Actes-Sud, 2006). Mahjoub was born in London but grew up in Sudan. His first three novels—*Navigation of a Rainmaker*, *Wings of Dust*, and *In the Hour of Signs* (all with Heinemann International Literature & Textbooks, 1989)—form a loose trilogy dealing with Sudan and its history. Later works focus on migration and identity in today's Europe. He is currently writing a nonfiction book on the Darfur conflict. Mahjoub lives and works in Barcelona.

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The first thing that struck me about the kid was the stink. I felt my gorge rise and had to fight the impulse to throw up. A putrid combination of rotten organic matter and unwashed clothes, like he'd been sleeping in a waste container for weeks, which he might well have been. It was all I could do to hold him at arm's length. Fenton was talking to the waiter in his broken Spanish. I was supposed to make sure the boy didn't get away. After a while, though, it began to get to me. It felt silly holding on to him at all. Wrong. An abuse in some way. Here we were, three well fed, fully grown men, using force to restrain a skinny kid who was twelve years old at most, not too tall for his age, and clearly malnourished into the bargain. If he had been struggling perhaps it might have been justified, but he was making no move to run for it. On the contrary, all the fight seemed to have gone out of him. He just stood there with a pathetic expression of resignation on his face, the kind you might expect to see on a condemned man. I tried to imagine what lay in store for him; a juvenile detention centre maybe, with deportation at the end of it. It didn't sound like much, but then again, he didn't look like someone who'd had a great deal of luck in life.

Fenton and the waiter were still talking. I had the feeling Fenton's Spanish was really not much better than mine, though he always claimed to be fairly fluent. The waiter didn't care either way. He was a nasty piece of work. That much was clear from the moment we sat down. Dressed in a white shirt, black tie and waistcoat, his hair slicked back with some kind of oil, he approached our table with nonchalant reluctance, taking our orders with disdain while staring off into the distance, watching a girl cross the square, a pigeon circle the sky. Then he sloped off towards the interior of the restaurant without a word. Fenton was oblivious.

'What a great place,' he grinned.

It's what happens. A few years ago you could still describe the old part of this city as charming. It was possible to wander for hours without haste. People still treated you with respect. These days they have seen enough ugly tourists to make them despise us collectively as a breed. The charm is waning. Now they are on you like a flock of vultures; waiters waving menus in your face, confidence tricksters, beggars kneeling like penitents on the pavements, bearded men touting cans of lager at every corner. The innocence has gone. A stream of insistent buskers turned up at our table one after another, with all the spontaneity of a chain gang. Throwing circus clubs in the air, strumming out of tune guitars, they gave a perfunctory performance and then demanded your money. It was an extortion racket. If nothing was forthcoming they were quick to curse you in one of a dozen languages.

By now I was supporting the kid more than restraining him. If I had let go of his arm he would have collapsed to the ground in a heap

There wasn't much more to him than skin and bones. The right side of his face was swelling up from the hefty slap he took when the waiter grabbed him. The rotten, miserable sight of him made me feel ashamed. An hour or so ago I was still living under the spell of the projected illusion that this city, like so many other places in the world, was a playground for people like me. [...]

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**EXCERPTS  
IN  
TRANSLATION**

# In Search of Alice/

A LA RECHERCHE D'ALICE

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**Author: Sophie Bassignac**  
**Translator: Alessandra**  
**Benedicty**  
**Publisher : Denoel**  
**Publication: 2009**  
**Word count: 2,979**

*“In Search of Alice is a delight that confirms—if not more—all the good one already could have been thinking about Sophie Bassignac” — *Livres Hebdo**

A charmingly Parisian love story between a quirky tour guide and a police inspector in which bad behavior turns out to be wonderfully good.

Alice is a mother of two and a tour guide at the Louvre. She is also the recipient of an anonymous letter claiming that her husband has a mistress—a famous photojournalist. Alice’s response to the letter, as to many other things, is more than slightly unusual. After reading it, Alice goes to the photographer’s home, speaks to her, and determines that the letter is telling the truth. After inadvertently making a chaotic mess of the house, she ties the photographer to the bathroom faucet . . . and leaves. Then, seized by sudden remorse, mainly out of consideration for the woman’s gorgeous breasts, she returns to untie her. The photographer immediately calls the police. It was a baffling revenge at best, and now Alice sits in the waiting room of a Paris police station. And then the plot thickens . . .

Inspector Picasso recognizes Alice from the past, as a best friend of his wife’s. But that was years ago, and besides, his wife has all but left him. . . . The more Picasso listens to Alice—and looks at her—the more deeply he is taken with her. He will have plenty of opportunities to be around her, as he must find out who sent the letter and whether Alice is being followed. Picasso himself follows her to the Loire Valley for her mother’s funeral, looking for clues in what he thinks is a simple investigation, finding instead a taste of fleeting, but true, happiness.

**Sophie Bassignac** is the author of a celebrated first novel, *Les aquariums lumineux*, which was sold in six countries (Italy: Einaudi; Spain: Grijalbo Mondadori; Poland: Amber; Russia: Atticus; South Korea: Mellon; China: Phoenix). *À la recherche d’Alice* is her second novel.

// “Sit”, said Inspector Picasso.

With a moist and fleeting gaze, shoulders gathered, and surrounding noises resounding in his head like gunshots, Alice sat down in front of him.

“Coffee?”

“Yes, thank you”, she murmured.

“Coignard, two coffees” Picasso said, his fingers in a “v”. Turning on his computer, he opened a yellow folder.

“You should have called me” he added, once his colleague had disappeared into the hallway. “I would have figured out a way to avoid all of this...”

“No, no”, she breaks him off. “It’s fine like this.”

Returning to the station around five in the evening, the inspector had found Alice Conque, his wife’s friend, in a prison cell where she’d been sobering up while simmering up an unbelievable story. He thought to himself that this must have been the first time that he’d had such a close view of this little blond woman. For years already and on many an occasion, they’d crossed paths.

“Who is this person, Catherine Hersch?” the inspector asked.

“She’s a photographer. A reporter. She works mostly abroad, kind of like Vincent.”

“Your husband?...”

“Yes.”

Helen had already told Picasso that Vincent Conque was a journalist, that he traveled incessantly and that Alice was often alone. “Even more lonely than me. Now that’s something!” his wife had retorted with a violent laugh and a cold shoulder.

Using the left-hand side of his peripheral vision as he followed the undulating path of a synthetic purple-green fish on the night-blue background of his computer screen, the inspector made sure to sustain a perfectly clear and present image of Alice. He’d already noted that she was wearing red gym shoes and a Beatles pin on the inside of her coat. She was probably in her forties. “Now is the era of women...” he thought. After a twenty-five year career, people didn’t really hold his interest much, but this woman emitted a sort of poetry that weakened him, sort of like the onset of a cold. [...]

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# And The River Will Kill The White Man/

MAIS LE FLEUVE TUERA L'HOMME BLANC

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**Author: Patrick Besson**  
**Translator: Edward Gauvin**  
**Publisher : Fayard**  
**Publication : 2009**  
**Word count: 3,962**

By one of France's most esteemed authors, *Mais le fleuve tuera l'homme blanc* is an intricately plotted political thriller, depicting the Congo-Brazzaville of today and the Rwandan genocide.

An executive at an oil company, Christophe Parmentier recognizes a retired spy, Blandine de Kergalec, in the airport on his way to Brazzaville. A fan of anything spy, he decides upon his arrival to follow her. De Kergalec is in the Congolese capital for an ultimate and lucrative mission: organizing the assassination of Jean-Pierre Rwabango, a Hutu priest who actively participated in the genocide.

During his one week stay, Parmentier will meet a large cast of characters including Tessy, a young Congolese who was raped thirteen times during the 1994 events, Pouchkine, a mulatto and father of Tessy's younger son, Elena, Pouchkine's mother, a Russian who has been living and doing business in the Republic of Congo for twenty years, Bernard Lemaire, her business partner and lover, Joshua of the Tutsi secret services, Angèle and Charles, siblings of Jean-Pierre Rwabango, and Tendresse, the gorgeous Tutsi girl who escaped from the genocide. At different levels all become involved in this act of revenge.

With a brilliant narrative structure interspersing flashbacks and giving a voice to each of his characters, Besson gives a fascinating portrait of a Sub-Saharan Africa where each considers the other as an endless source of legends, mysteries, and occult powers.

**Patrick Besson** published his first book at 17 and has since published a total of 40 books including *Dara* which was the winner of the Prix de l'Académie Française in 1985 and *Les Braban*, winner of the Prix Renaudot in 1995. He is also a journalist for leading French newspapers Le Figaro, L'Humanité and VSD.

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*[...] But the sun will kill the white man,  
But the moon will kill the white man,  
But the sorcerer will kill the white man,  
But the tiger will kill the white man,  
But the crocodile will kill the white man,  
But the elephant will kill the white man,  
But the river will kill the white man.*

Late 19th century Congolese folk song

I recognized her in line at customs, though the only photo of her ever to appear in the papers was from 1985. She was dressed like a man, like when she'd been arrested last century. Her short hair was gray now. Behind round lenses in a steely, Trotskyesque frame, glasses all nearsighted girls of her generation wore—they'd stopped, why hadn't she?—you saw the same big empty eyes, fearful, roving. Her line was moving faster than mine. She must have read the clothes, the carriage, the carry-ons, the faces of everyone waiting to pass customs. Gauged the chances each did or didn't have of being detained by an official. Then made a quick mental reckoning and picked the right line. This bit of work had given her a few minutes' lead. The minutes that sometimes save your life. I lost sight of her, then found her again in the lounge. She was traveling business class, like me. I was in oil. What was she in now?

When I realized we were on the same flight, I thought perhaps we'd be seated side by side. She'd get the vague and plaintive gaze of a famous person wondering if you knew who they were. When it came to notoriety from a shocking news story, an unspeakable political act, or a catastrophic military operation, such silent questioning grew tinged with fear and shame. Alas, the cabin crew gestured us to different rows. Why alas? It was better this way. If I'd been seated next to her for several hours, I would've wound up asking her questions she wouldn't have answered. If she were even the same Blandine de Kergalec who'd once made the headlines. Hard as Breton granite, the editorialists had said in their usual style. She sat down on the other side of the plane, two rows back. She was by the window. For a few moments she kept her purse on her knees, as though she had doubts about wanting to reach her destination, then slipped it under her seat. She had no book, no iPod, no DVD player. She'd spend the six hours thinking, like anyone beset by an obsession. Had she noticed I was watching her? Her way of not seeing me made me think so.

A frail figure slipped past my knees, followed by a slight sigh to my right: the tiny wisp of a creature had sat down. A runny suit streamed down his nonexistent shoulders. He introduced himself. Passengers in business class introduce themselves, to do business. He was an advisor to African presidents. Advisors to African presidents are interested in oil men, and oil men in advisors to African presidents. They practice a single profession in Africa: bleeding it dry.[...]

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# Our Kisses Are Farewell/

NOS BAISERS SONT DES ADIEUX

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**Author: Nina Bouraoui**  
**Translator: M.A Salvodon**  
**Publisher : Stock**  
**Publication : 2010**  
**Word count: 1,857**

Desire and love lie at the core of *Nos baisers sont des adieux*. Franco-Algerian author Nina Bouraoui explores these universal elements as she relates her journey of awakening to her homosexuality in her early teens. Now in her forties, she revisits her diaries and notes to write a novel about her feelings, her family, and her friends. She tells us of her childhood in Algeria, her frantic teenage years in Germany, and her self-realization as a woman in Paris.

We follow Bouraoui in her quest for sexual and emotional fulfillment from Algeria to Berlin, Paris, Zurich, and Abu Dhabi. She introduces us to those who introduced her to the many meanings of love and desire: Johan the tomboy, who fascinated her as a teenager; Esther the junkie, who could no longer feel anything; Sasha, whose kisses sounded like a good-bye. We meet, too, the men in her early life -- her father, and her first lovers in Algeria. The travelogue of the people she loved is punctuated by the presence of objects -- a long rifle, for example, and some vintage Playboy magazines she found in an old apartment -- which disturbed and sometimes aroused her. The places, the people, and the pieces are turned, in her talented hands, into a vibrating novel that conveys the intimate and sentimental geography of a woman.

**Nina Bouraoui** was born in Rennes, France, to an Algerian father and a French mother. Shortly thereafter, she moved with her family to Algiers, where she lived until age fourteen. Bouraoui received the literary prize Prix du Livre Inter in 1991 for *La voyageuse interdite* (Gallimard, 1991), translated in English as *Forbidden Vision* (Station Hill Press, 1998). *Nos baisers sont des adieux* is her latest novel after *Mes Mauvaises Pensées* (Stock, prix Renaudot in 2005), published in English as *Tomboy* (University of Nebraska Press, 2007), and *Appelez moi par mon prenom* (Stock, 2008).

## // The Crowd, Paris 2009

At the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, I used to think that each of us had a story, and that all of these stories interconnected, every joy and pain, each moment of grief and birth, every single separation and encounter; I told myself that we were enjoying ourselves and suffering all in the same way and that all these feelings, one then another, matched, without our knowing it, that each wavelength formed invisible sketches, that we walked together, and not without the other, that loneliness was a matter of perspective.

## The Journal, Paris 2004

October 9th

I let myself be overtaken by time, refusing to reread her letters, to look at her photos, to wear the clothes I wore in her presence. I never go down Vieille-du-Temple toward the Seine, fearing that I will meet her or retrace the steps we took together. I no longer listen to our songs, changing the station when one of them is played. I refuse to imagine her, to visualize the rituals of her daily life (her house, her garden, her friends). I refuse to think about our intimacy.

October 13th

When I run into a woman wearing her perfume, I burrow my face in my scarf or my coat's collar. Everything that connects me to her connects me to a suffering larger than the one she engendered: I lost my gestures of love (writing, calling). I count on the days to quiet my pain, writing a new book that becomes a barrier against our shared life, fleeing and fine like the memory I keep of her: she is sitting on a bench in the Picasso museum, smoking a cigarette, alone, with a sad countenance, unaware that I am watching her. I understand before speaking words.

October 15th

Sometimes I fall asleep thinking that we are still together. My dreams unite us. My consciousness separates us. I'd like to know if she misses me, if she thinks about me. My suffering comes from this silence□ the silence of feelings. I tell myself that life overpowers her, that her time is out of sync with mine. We don't share the same thoughts. [...]

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# The Panda Theory/

LA THÉORIE DU PANDA

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**Author: Pascal Garnier**  
**Translator: William Rodarmor**  
**Publisher : Zulma**  
**Publication : 2008**  
**Word Count: 1,423**

**“An innovative and unmistakable highpoint in the landscape of noir fiction.” — *L’Humanité***

This dark psychological thriller takes place in a small town in Brittany. A stranger arrives in town and checks into a hotel. We don’t know anything about him except that his name is Gabriel.

Gabriel seems to be there for no particular purpose, and spends his time befriending and helping those whose path he crosses: Madeleine, the receptionist who feels lonely and bored in life, José, the owner of a Portuguese restaurant, who is left alone with his two young children while his wife is in a coma at the hospital; and Rita and Marco, a couple of junkies waiting for the man’s father to die to get the inheritance.

Gabriel proves to be pleasant, thoughtful and up for grabs. He knows how to listen and cheer up these people who are having a hard time. Moreover he becomes the friend one can count on. As his name suggests he is like an angel.

At the beginning, we wonder where Gabriel comes from, and why he is so secretive about his life. While his past unfolds, his portrayal becomes more accurate, intriguing, verily unsettling. As hints of a darker past emerge, the story then becomes more somber and disturbing.

Born in 1949 in Paris, **Pascal Garnier** left home as a teenager to travel the world. Short-story writer, noir novelist and author of children’s books, he is a prolific and versatile writer with an unparalleled ability to evoke ordinary characters mired in drab lives. Unsparingly clear-eyed, his sensibility is nonetheless marked by a great tenderness towards his protagonists.

// He drew a beer and absentmindedly wiped the counter before setting it down.

«I usually serve food, but not tonight.»

«Too bad.»

The man stood there for a moment, eyes lowered, awkward, crumpling his dishtowel. Then he hopped back onto his stool behind the cash register. Aside from the four copper lights hanging over the bar, the place was dark. Probably because there weren't any customers. You could make out tables and chairs, and beyond them, in the back room, children's toys, a pedal tractor, blocks, Legos, an open book, sheets of paper, and scattered red marker pens. He didn't touch his beer. Maybe he hadn't really felt like having one.

«You want something to eat?»

«Yes.»

«My wife does the cooking, but she's in the hospital.»

«Sorry to hear that.»

For a moment, the only sound was the hissing of the foam on the beer.

«You like codfish stew?»

«Yeah, I guess so.»

«I've got some left. I was about to close up, so if you like...»

«Sure.»

«Sit down. Not here, in back. Follow me.»

A clamor of lemon-yellow neon light suddenly lit up the back room. Together, the two men stepped over the pedal tractor, the blocks, the Legos, and the sheets of paper covered with brightly colored children's drawings.

«Sit over there.»

He took a seat at a table across from a huge television set. It was covered with an oilcloth decorated with white daisies on an apple-green background.

«Won't be a moment.»

Before leaving, the restaurant owner pushed a button on the remote. The TV screen erupted with a flood of incoherent images and deafening sounds in a nonstop gurgling, like blood from a slit throat.

«... but the tally is temporary. In Northern Ireland...»

«Bacalao!»

The owner set two bowls full of cod, potatoes, peppers, and tomatoes on the table, along with a bottle of vinho verde.

«Enjoy.»

«Thanks.»

«... the parents have sent a message to the kidnappers. Here is what they said...»

«My wife Marie cooks, but I'm the one who taught her how. I'm Portuguese, she's Breton. All she knew how to make was crêpes. She still cooks them. We're in Brittany, so you gotta make crêpes for the Bretons. Are you Breton?»

«No.»

«Didn't think so.»

«Why?»

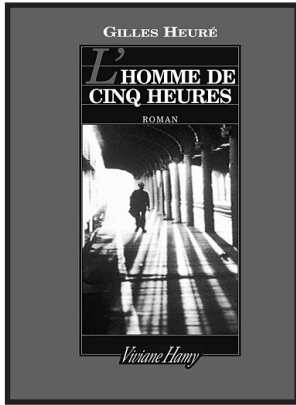
«Bretons chug their beer down. You didn't.»

«Is it serious?» [...]

//

# The Five O'clock Man/

L'HOMME DE CINQ HEURES



**Author:** Gilles Heuré  
**Translator:** Gilda Roberts  
**Publisher :** Viviane Hamy  
**Publication:** 2009  
**Word count:** 1,664

“A delicious journey into literature and painting, this unusual first novel seduces the reader with its intrigue and strong characters.”  
—*Lire*

How and when does a work of art begin? And why is five in the evening such an important time for creation? Gilles Heuré invites the reader to join him—and a man who claims to be poet-philosopher Paul Valéry—on a series of walks through Paris. The clock strikes five . . . and the conversation turns to writers and painters and what inspires them.

Paul Béhaine, alone as usual, leaves the Bibliothèque Nationale on rue de Richelieu as it closes, just after five o'clock. He decides that for a change he will walk home, and he starts across the Pont des Arts. A man—a stranger in many ways—begins to talk to him in hushed tones. “I’ve been told that one can no longer begin a novel with ‘The marquise went out at five o’clock in the evening,’ ” says the stranger. The man goes on, explaining his theory that that time of the day is of significant importance in literature and the arts. Béhaine finds himself increasingly interested. Then the man tells him something that cannot be true—he claims to be Paul Valéry, poet and philosopher. Valéry died in 1945. . . . But Béhaine is so entranced by the stranger’s conversation that he can ignore this clear theft of identity.

The two meet regularly, at five o'clock, to wander the streets of Paris and discuss the five-o'clock factor in art and for such artists as Stendhal, Goya, Hemingway, and Brecht. Monsieur V, as Paul begins to refer to him, is widely knowledgeable and a brilliant and amusing conversationalist, which keeps Paul listening attentively. The day arrives when Monsieur V suggests that he has taught Paul everything he can—and then no longer appears for their walks. Paul, intent on finding him and learning his true identity, discovers his house and the bulk of his research on the five-o'clock theory. In an unexpected turn, he at last learns Monsieur V’s real name.

**Gilles Heuré** is a reporter for *Télérama* and the author of two works of nonfiction: *Historien du sensible* (Éditions la Découverte, 2000) and *L'insoumis Leon-Werth 1878–1955* (Éditions Viviane Hamy, 2006). *L'homme de cinq heures* is his first novel.



## Prologue

*In which our hero, Paul Béhaine, is approached by a curious character claiming to be Paul Valéry who implores him, « Above all, don't listen to those who say it and repeat it! »*

He could have easily gone on working a little longer, but you can't fool around with the seventeenth century. The Bibliothèque Nationale, that distinguished public institution founded by Cardinal Richelieu, had extremely strict schedules. The first bell, indicating the quarter-hour before five o'clock, had just sounded, so, like all the other readers Paul Béhaine had resigned himself to collecting his things and handing in his books at the central window. Some people had quickened their step in order to overtake those overhead of them, like unruly schoolboys too impatient to wait in line or fearful of being punished for not obeying instructions on the spot. The fact is, closing time was irremediably set at five o'clock in the evening.

Paul Béhaine took the rue Vivienne, crossed the Palais-Royal gardens and walked past the Comédie-Française as far as Place Colette. Would he take the bus, telling himself, like Colette's own little Claudine in Paris, "Here comes the Pantheon-Courcelles, peaceable and zigzagging" – in short, leap aboard a Parisian omnibus? No. A walk would be more likely to clear his mind. He made for the Pont des Arts and leaned on the guardrail as he contemplated the crowd around him. His gaze swept over his contemporaries: tourists out for a good time, hyped-up Parisians leaving work while others quietly walked their dogs, searching for some small patch of grass.

It would be untrue to say that he no longer gave a thought to what had been occupying his mind since this morning, yet many of the words of his day, painted or handwritten, were beginning to fly away, like so many autumn leaves scattered by a sudden gust of wind. You can take the metaphor or leave it, but on reflection it did not strike him as ridiculous – on the contrary, it seemed to him rather apt. That's it, he told himself, now be an atom among atoms once again, one passerby among the many: lift up your nose, sniff the air, walk let your fancy fly free and relax. Come on, don't hate yourself for not going on working.

The air was borne by a cool breeze, the Seine languidly drawing to itself the last rays of this autumn late afternoon, while overhead the clouds were fighting bizarre duels with the playful wind. Sensitive to the Parisian panorama, Paul thought of Impressionist paintings while mentally greeting Apollinaire, who loved to stroll along the two banks. His mind freer now, he did not immediately notice the person approaching him. He only paid him attention when he heard these few words, whispered confidentially rather than spoken aloud:

*"Don't listen to those who say it and repeat it!" [...]*



# The Double Life of Anna Song/

LA DOUBLE VIE D'ANNA SONG

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**Author:** Minh Tran Huy  
**Translator:** Alison Anderson  
**Publisher :** Actes Sud  
**Publication :** 2009  
**Word count:** 3,431

*The Double Life of Anna Song* explores the fascination of a man for a woman. It is a reinterpretation of Orpheus and Eurydice, an ode to music and love amid fraud and deception.

When pianist Anna Song learns that she will die from cancer, she leaves the city with her husband, Paul, to live in an old manor in the country. She dreams of devoting her last years to playing and recording the best of the piano repertoire, from Beethoven to Ravel. The records Paul produces create an unprecedented oeuvre; Anna is acclaimed as “the best pianist whom no one had ever heard of”—a true phenomenon. Journalists, however, eventually discover that she is not the performer of her recordings and begin to investigate her.

The novel includes journalists’ reports of the investigations and subsequent exposures, but at its core is a love story. Paul Deroches tells his version of their lives and the emotions that drove him into a world of deceit. The two met when Anna and Paul were children. Paul’s parents had died, and his grandmother, concerned about his loneliness, introduced him to Anna, a young and musically talented Vietnamese girl. The fascination Paul felt at their first meeting deepened. The two were separated during adolescence when Anna moved with her parents to the United States. When they met again 15 years later, Paul’s love was still strong, but Anna had changed. She had had to give up the idea of becoming a professional musician—a rare illness had paralyzed one of her fingers. Paul then devoted his life and energy to convincing her that she was a brilliant pianist.

Based on a true event—the story of British pianist Joyce Hatto—this novel is an original reflection on love and admiration. As in her first novel, Minh Tran Huy creates her own universe, inspired by Vietnam, remembrance, and a particular relationship between fiction and reality. She plunges the reader into a gripping story where the mystery remains a mystery until the end.

Born in Paris in 1979, **Minh Tran Huy** is a deputy editor of *Le Magazine Littéraire* and a literary critic. *La double vie d’Anna Song* is her third novel after *La Princesse et le pêcheur* (Actes Sud, 2007) and *Le Lac né en une nuit* (Actes Sud, 2008).

“ [...] At the time of her death, Anna Song’s legacy consisted of 102 CDs that included, among other things, the entire body of works for piano for by Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Ravel; the nine sonatas by Prokofiev; almost all of Chopin; major works by Liszt and Debussy; all the concertos by Brahms, Saint-Saëns and Rachmaninov; and the 54 etudes by Leopold Godowsky, inspired by Chopin and considered to be the most difficult pieces ever written for the piano. Only Artur Rubinstein with his 94 CDs even comes close in comparison. However, Rubinstein recorded a number of works several times, and spread them out over an entire lifetime—this could hardly be the case for Anna Song. The majority of her recordings were made when she was gravely ill and had reached a time in life when most other artists are enjoying the pleasures of retirement, which they may on occasion come out of in order to impart their knowledge to the younger generation, with varying degrees of modesty. And modesty was the most striking feature of this great pianist’s personality, in life and in her approach to her music. For two decades she found the strength to struggle against an illness that should have struck her down; never yielding to convenience or discouragement she persevered along a path that seemed to lead nowhere; and at the same time, her strength was coupled with a total absence of ego or vanity. Nothing was more important to Anna Song than to serve the composers she admired in the best way possible. “We performers,” she observed in one of her rare interviews, “—what are we, other than humble cogs in the wheel? When someone says to me, ‘What a marvelous piece!’: that is the true compliment. Our task consists in conveying the spiritual essence of existence as it has been incarnated in harmony or counterpoint. Nothing belongs to us. It is important to remember Bach, Mozart, Liszt, yes, it is even vital. But to remember me... what is the point of that? In the end, only the music will survive.”

*Anna Song is no more. She kept no articles or press cuttings chronicling her career. All that mattered to her was that a few weeks ago, sitting in a wheelchair, she managed to record a last piece by Chopin. Its title now rings like a premonition: La Valse de l’adieu.*

This morning I read the first feature article about Anna’s death. I put it with the others that I had cut out and stuck in a big moleskin notebook. The journalist was right when he said that she had kept no review of the press. He forgot to mention, however, that I took care of all that—unbeknownst to Anna, it’s true. It was my morning ritual: I would weed through the culture and music columns of the dailies, weeklies, and monthlies, and I painstakingly pored over all the specialized press and websites in search of her name. In recent years I have found it more and more frequently. The last months. The buzz that had been created around her recordings was extremely flattering, and besides, people have always loved stories about artistes maudits. One after the other, journalists felt duty bound to rush forward and proclaim Anna was a genius, to ask for interviews, to bring her out of oblivion. Justice must be rendered, they said, it was time to show the world what a remarkable artist had been overlooked: no one should ever have been neglected the way she had been. I agreed, and to prove it I vigorously supported their pronouncements and answered all their questions, explaining that Anna was too sick to meet with anyone, but that did not matter, I was here, I had always been here, and I told them they and I told them they could count on me to provide all the possible and imaginable information about Anna—her work, her past and future projects. [...]

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# On the Sand/

*SUR LE SABLE*

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**Author:** Michèle Lesbre  
**Translator:** Alison Anderson  
**Publisher :** Sabine Wespieser  
**Parution date :** 2009  
**Word count:** 1,383

*Sur le sable* is luminous and sensitive—a multilayered story into which Lesbre plunges the reader deep into the intimate past of two damaged characters.

The narrator, who has just left her companion, has decided to escape from Paris for a few days. As she drives along the coastline, enjoying her last moments before returning to the capital, she sees flames shooting out from the dunes. Without thought, without calling for help, she walks across the hot sand to locate the starting point of the fire. She finds a man sitting alone in front of a house that is being consumed by fire. “That’s nothing. It’s my little war” he says. “It’s finished. I came to an end with it.” The stranger persuades her to stay with him, and he begins to reveal the secrets of his heart. They sit and talk for hours, for the whole night, with the burning dune becoming the catalyst for both of them to try to face their own little wars.

This novel is both a story of remembrance and a tribute to Modiano. Lesbre builds a bridge between the narrator’s experiences and Modiano’s novels by including characters, situations, hotel names, and passages extracted from his books. She tells us a superb and singular story that we can easily appreciate without ever having read the work of Patrick Modiano.

Born in 1947 in Poitiers, **Michèle Lesbre** was a schoolteacher for several years before deciding to take up writing. She published detective novels until 2001, when she published her first work of literary fiction, *Nina, par hasard* (Actes Sud) Since then she has published *Boléro* (Actes Sud, 2003), *Un certain Felloni* (Actes Sud, 2004), *La petite trotteuse* (Sabine Wespieser Editeur, 2005), and *Le canapé rouge* (Sabine Wespieser Editeur, 2007), which was a finalist for the Goncourt Prize and translated into eight languages.

// [...] I had been driving past the dune for a while already when suddenly I saw the flames. They reached across the dark sky, leaving no sign of what they might be devouring with such frenzy. I had no idea where I was; for over an hour I'd been driving aimlessly. I must have been near one of those beaches that I had not visited yet, that were too far off my routine itineraries through this temporary place. Since I had left Paris, I was no longer at home anywhere. And in any event, I did not want to be at home.

I stood motionless for several minutes watching the strange spectacle. Sparks flew up from the inferno and vanished immediately mid-flight. A light the color of blood gradually flooded the sky, magnificent. So I opened the car door, and was met by a blast of hot air. I don't know why I didn't just continue my wandering, or why I did not go for help. I crossed the road and began to climb up the dune, keeping clear of the blaze; its quiet roar veiled the sound of the ocean. My feet sank into the burning sand. As I went closer, the roar of the fire intensified. When I reached the top of the dune, I could see the beach, red and trembling in the heat. Then, before my very eyes, the roof caved in, a slow collapse of great beauty. I began to run to go back to my car, but a man's voice called out, It's all right! I turned my head, he was sitting on the sand, tranquil. I thought perhaps he had escaped the worst, and that he wanted to reassure me as he recovered from the emotion. But he stood up, came closer, and said quite confidently, It's nothing, just my little war, it's all over, I've got the better of them, come and sit down.

I did not try to run away, I was not afraid of the man despite his enigmatic words. I think it was his little war that from the start created a sort of intimacy between us, or something of that nature, something that was not unlike my own nocturnal roving that I could not defeat. Every night I would feel forced to go out, to go around in circles wherever I might be and only return at daybreak, exhausted. It had lasted for nearly two weeks, already; I had often changed hotels and finally decided to head back to Paris the very next day.

I did not resist his request, we sat side by side not far from the waves that brought a slight chill. Why didn't I try to escape—but on the other hand, would I have been able to, if he had tried to prevent me? Might he have thought of it? He inspired no fear in me, he talked persistently about the moment he had finally reached, the disappearance of a house that seemed to have played a particular role in his life, and against which, no doubt for a long time now, he had been waging his little war. Occasionally his speech was incoherent, and I gradually lapsed into the hypnotic effect it exerted, until very soon I was no longer altogether present, I was there and I was elsewhere, the way you are when a shock sends you into an artificial absence, a parenthesis. I thought that he and I were like two survivors of a catastrophe, two shipwrecked souls each trying to awake from a nightmare. Everything was drifting away around us, I was losing my grip, I no longer knew very clearly what chain of events had driven me onto this beach, or at least I wasn't very sure anymore, I even wondered whether in some way or another I might not bear my small share of the blame, too. Dazed by drowsiness, perhaps I drove off the road, crashed into the house, and caused the fire? If I had been required to provide a precise account of my presence there, at that time, with this stranger, I would have been capable of signing any declaration, accepting any version of the facts, taking it all on myself, perhaps. [...] //

# The Prisoner/

LE PRISONNIER

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**Author: Anne Plantagenet**  
**Translator: Julie Rose**  
**Publisher: Stock**  
**Publication: 2009**  
**Word count: 7,000**

**In a small mountain village in France, a young and unhappy schoolteacher is forced to be a wounded man’s jailer for a night, a man long thought to be the terror of the area but now finally captured. The novel asks us to consider just what makes a prison—and a prisoner.**

A group of young men from the village bang on Julia’s door and demand that the young schoolteacher accompany them. They lead her to the school, where, on the floor, lies a bleeding, savage-looking man. The feared “Papa” has been captured at last. Papa has been living in the forests that surround the village, hiding from the residents, who believe him to be a monster who has raped and murdered and who think him a drinker of blood and eater of the flesh of their children. Because of her position of authority, Julia is charged with keeping Papa alive until morning and is locked with him in her own classroom.

Julia is deeply frightened of the man. Papa’s penetrating gaze unsettles her and makes her even more uncomfortable and unaccepting of the role that has been forced on her. At first she can think only of escape, but gradually she begins to understand the position that Papa is in. She offers him food and drink, and slowly they begin to talk, and she sees that there is more to him than the dreaded “Papa.” Julia begins to wonder about the prisoner’s culpability. The more they talk, the more she finds herself thinking about her own life and the walls she has built around it. By morning she finds herself transformed. She is no longer dead to the world, no longer only the victim of her former lover’s betrayal and abandonment. Leaving the classroom that served as a prison for her as well as Papa, she feels unexpectedly free.

This resonant novel pairs two unlikely characters in a fateful meeting that leaves at least one of them changed. The night has blurred the line between victim and perpetrator, jail and freedom, prisoner and jailer.

**Anne Plantagenet** is the author of two previous novels and of biographies of Marilyn Monroe and of Manolete. Her latest book was a collection of short stories, *Pour des siècles et des siècles* (Éditions Stock in 2008). One of her novels, *The Last Rendez vous*, is forthcoming from The Other Press.

// The men turned up at Julia's in the middle of the night. They came in numbers, five, six, she's not really sure now, they hammered on her door like maniacs and said you have to come teacher, straight away, Papa's been arrested, he's here, two feet away, you have to take him something to eat and clean him up a bit, you know, he's not a pretty sight, come on. It was the dead of night and that's what they said, yelled, yapped even, you have to come teacher, making panicked, imploring gestures with their hands. That's how it happened. The boys were wild, their eyes had a feverish glint, you'd have thought they'd seen the devil. Julia didn't understand their terror and why, to her own embarrassment, she found herself infected by it. The hunt for Papa had kept everyone on alert for months but it didn't interest her in the slightest. And it wasn't what made the men of the hamlet land on her at that hour of the night, either. It was his capture. The hunt, you get used to it, you adapt to it, it gives a certain rhythm to your days, fills your dreams. It's when it ends that you're thrown off kilter. There the animal is, suddenly real, nervous and exhausted. Not as big as anticipated. He stinks. He's no longer an idea being hounded, he's turned into insomnia,

a deadend. Anyway, Julia wasn't asleep and other people's worries don't soften her own. Julia doesn't sleep anymore. Every night, at around two, three o'clock, she sits up straight in bed and she waits. There is the silence all around, no one left on earth, just Julia with her bitterness and her grief. She unlocks her jaw, lets go of whatever she's been holding on to all day long, in front of the kids, at the farm, at the grocer's, in the street, opens the floodgates held back by decorum, by appearances, by lies, and she waits. At best, there are tears. It's no good, though, anger generally wins out over pain, Julia is full of rage, of hate, it drives her sadness right to the back of the nest, gnaws away at her liver and little by little her reason. Naturally no one suspects, Julia on the outside throws the hounds off-scent and sticks pretty well to the role she's supposed to be playing. But at home behind closed doors, things are different, for months now she's been collapsing in a heap and whenever she gets up again, which is a little harder every time, it's to take her place of a morning on the dais of her classroom in front of the ten or so desks that face her. Julia talks, recites, sings, sermonises, rewards, explains, sometimes all in one morning and at the same time she's drowning, and no one knows. Not because of Papa, Julia couldn't care less about Papa. He's the least of her worries. She's read what the local paper has been saying about him, she's heard the news on the radio, she hasn't been able to completely ignore what different ones have been telling each other over and over, at the farm, at the grocer's, in the street, and even in school, the kids as well since Papa has been at the centre of everyone's conversations everywhere for months. But Julia hasn't managed to throw off her own drama enough to get interested in the drama of some guy on the run accused of every evil. To each his own misery. You've got your troubles, I've got mine. It's not selfishness, more like total confusion verging on obsession. Julia has had her share of sorrow, fate has not stinted with her, she has all she needs to be a wreck.

This particular night she took absolutely ages to open the door. You have to come teacher, they cried from the other side. Kids, all, fifteen, sixteen years old, Julia doesn't know their exact age, she lives surrounded by children. She's barely older than they are, but learning divides them more than years, the alphabet, arithmetic, school, in a word. Teacher. The mayor is away on business, it is just bad luck that she is the only authority in this godforsaken hole that night. Suddenly everything depends on her, falls to her, she is the only one, apparently, up to the job of getting them out of the mess they've got themselves into. Miss, miss... they all but put their hands up. We're sorry, but you have to come, open up. [...]

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# Gand Journal: the Aleutian Islands/

LE JOURNAL DE GAND AUX ALEOUTIENNES

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**Author:** Jean Rolin  
**Translator:** Linda Coverdale  
**Publisher:** La Table Ronde  
**Publication:** 2010/  
**Originally published in** 1982  
**Word count:** 2,072

**This journal describes trips to places and with people who could broaden our worlds and increase our sense of what can be seen and learned, if only we would really dare to go. Luckily, Rolin takes us with him. The book is written with an appealing combination of realism and fantasy that is the essence of any journey into the unknown.**

Inspired by a trip the author took in 1980, *Journal de Gand aux Aléoutiennes* tells the fictional journal of a man, seemingly a drifter, who has joined the crew of the merchant marine vessel. The ship, the Meistersinger, is bound for the Aleutian Islands via Norway, Africa, and Brazil. The crew, a semi-civilized collection of men, often fighting or amusing themselves by playing catch with fresh cement, is headed by a captain who smokes opium and listens to opera. The man begins a love affair with a very small woman who becomes smaller day by day until she disappears entirely. When he becomes undesirable even to the motley crew of sailors, he is left alone on one of the Aleutian Islands. Jean Rolin can not only make people come to life, he also succeeds in describing the breathless beauty of the scenery, the vivid green color of tea plantations, the streetscapes of urban chaos and the heavy breath of the wild animals in the African night.

**Jean Rolin**, born in 1949, is a journalist and a writer. He is the winner of many prizes including the Albert Londres prize for journalism and his novel *L'organisation* received the Medecis award in 1996. He is the author of numerous acclaimed works of fiction including *Zones* (Gallimard, 1995), *L'explosion de la dureté* (P.O.L., 2007, recipient of the French Voices Grant, to be published by Dalkey Archives in English) and *Un chien mort après lui* (P.O.L., 2009.) His novel *Chrétiens* has been translated by IG Publishers in 2006.

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“It’s perfectly understandable that many boats wind up sinking.  
That’s what they deserve.”

Henri Michaux, Ecuador

“In case of a man overboard, toss the horseshoe buoy into the water;  
the self-acting smoke signal will then ignite.”

Anonymous, 20th

1

I’d been given an address in Antwerp by mistake, so I spent a long time looking in vain for The Meir, that city’s main shopping area, in various neighborhoods in Ghent. Passersby directed me to Kongostraat (a brick-paved street furrowed with streetcar tracks, ending at a right angle to a dock overlooking water of a naphthous sheen), where, in a strangely clean and silent house guarded by a tall old woman wearing a tight chignon and drooling with dignity behind a macramé curtain, I finally found the successor to the man I sought—who had been dead for half a century, this gentleman assured me, and under whose portrait he was in fact busy working. Invoices, ship’s manifests, receipts: the chance clatter of a telex introduced a note of agitation to this coldly polite Flemish interior, its creaking floor smelling of wax, a décor worthy of the Old Masters. Even though M. Van Overbecke and I spoke not a word of any common language, while I seemed to have turned up fifty years too late, our business was concluded to our mutual satisfaction. A quarter-hour after my arrival at Number 8-B Kongostraat, a car carried me swiftly away through mists harboring traffic lights, “wildcat” locomotives operating without any cars, and the foghorns of tugs, to deposit me and my sea bag on the wooden quay, precisely at the foot of the Meistersinger’s gangplank. They were finishing up unloading twelve thousand metric tons of Douglas-fir planking, and two stevedores had just been crushed by a falling sling load.

2

Shortly after our departure at nightfall from Ghent, as with the help of the Zeeland and the Westhinder we made our way slowly toward the sea along a stretch of slack water cluttered with canal boats, tugs, barges, pontoon cranes, and other industrious craft, at the very instant when the drawbridge at the Escaut River lock had reached its vertical position, an extremely violent argument arose between the commander of the Meistersinger (a Wagnerian and a papist) and the pilot from Terneuzeun (a Huguenot) regarding communion in the two cults and the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. During the ensuing brawl, the officers—doubtless endeavoring to please the skipper—broke their nautical rulers, the sextant, and most of the navigational instruments over the pilot’s skull, while the sailors (Bretons, and therefore touchy on any point of religion) abandoned their assigned posts to snatch up from the deck carbon dioxide extinguishers, an acetylene blowtorch, and anything else that could be used as a club to repel the crew of the Westhinder who, alerted by walkie-talkie, were streaming aboard to back up the pilot. Left to its own devices, and soon set alight by the flaming acetylene, the tug whirled for a few moments in the Terneuzen wet dock, whipping the black water into a death frenzy, then steamed full speed into the lock-chamber, rebounded into the quay, and wound up crashing into the Escaut gate. [...]

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