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Zachary Richard's "Faire récolte": a translation from the French

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ZACHARY RICHARD'S "FAIRE RÉCOLTE":
A TRANSLATION
FROM THE FRENCH

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of French Studies

by
Michael D. Bierschenk
B.A., The Ohio State University, 2004
May 2006

Dedication

To my committee members, Jeff Humphries, Greg Stone,
and Bernard Cerquiglini, who stayed with me through my garblings of
the French language, the vagaries of La Poste France,
and numerous hurried phone calls, all without any reservation.

To Barry Jean Ancelet, without whose knowledge of the Cajun
literary scene and the fight for the French language in Louisiana
these translations would be much the poorer.

To my friends and family, who endured endless
kvetchings on the finer points of the translator's art.

And, of course, to Zachary Richard, without whose
beautiful words none of this would exist.

A vous tous, merci infiniment!

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Abstract

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Cajun language, which had been entirely oral for most of its history, began to emerge as a productive literary language. One of the prominent new authors of the period was Zachary Richard, also an important Cajun musician. One of his collections of poetry, *Faire récolte* (Les Éditions Perce-Neige, 1997), is translated here. This thesis also includes a translator's note that briefly explores the broad themes of the poems and the methods used in translating them.

Introduction

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Cajun French, which had undergone a gradual but steady decline in the face of political, social, and economic pressures from the English-speaking majority, finally began to take a turn for the better. With the foundation of CODOFIL – the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana – and a concerted effort to reintroduce French into the public education system of the state, Cajuns began to take pride in their ancestral tongue. For the first time in decades, the question of language usage shifted subtly toward the minority, and a generation which had either given up or never learned French took up its cause.

Out of this milieu came Zachary Richard. Born in Scott, La. and educated at Tulane University in New Orleans, he is better known as a musician than as a poet, and not without reason. With over a dozen albums to his credit, his is a famous name both in Louisiana and in other regions of the francophone world, most notably in Canada, where he first gained renown. The poems in the present text, *Faire récolte (Take in the harvest)*, date between 1981 and 1994, a period which also includes some of his best known musical works (e.g. *Mardi Gras Mambo*, *Zack's Bon Ton*, *Snake Bite Love*). Richard's music often veers toward lively dance music, and its common themes of introspection and serious commentary must share the stage with the necessities of the dance floor. Here, they are laid bare.

Richard opens his text by presenting it as a way of legitimizing himself to his neighbors. He says in his brief introduction that he will, perhaps “give them copies and tell them the title, and since they can't read French (Cajuns are for the most part illiterate in their language) I'll be able to make them believe that it's a farmer's almanac and I'll win prestige in my little corner of the world.” He implicitly denies that *Take in the harvest* is any sort of almanac, but the poems

themselves give the lie to this contention. The majority of the poems, at least in the first two-thirds of the text, are brief three to fifteen line meditations on his immediate surroundings. They describe the cycles of the natural world, and are titled simply: “Heat,” “Fog,” “Hard Rain.” For almost all, he provides a date and place of composition, sometimes along with notations that give extra background to the poem, as in the notation for the “Haiku for St. Medard's Day”: *Sowing grass in the yard. 8 June 1981*. Taken individually, the brief notes are jewel-like delicacies, each one capturing a specific thought or sight like a mosquito in amber. Taken collectively, however, they combine to form a seasonal journal, a record of the treasures and vagaries of the Louisiana prairie: precisely the almanac he claims not to write. Richard is certainly aware of this fact; he even plays with the idea in the marginalia, presenting proverbs that would not be at all out of place in Poor Richard's Almanack: “If there be a rainbow in the eve, It will rain and leave” (“The Rainbow”).

The concern with nature also manifests itself through the titling system Richard employs. Of the ninety-five poems in the collection, fourteen are explicitly labeled as haiku, and three as variants: long-haiku and near-haiku. At first glance, the label seems incongruous, since most of the poems are more than three lines long, and none conform to the traditional Japanese syllable constraints (5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables). The key to understanding the label is, however, not any sort of metrical constraint, but rather a semantic one. Just like his Japanese models, Richard's haiku bracket specific natural action – a killdeer flying westward, a hard rainfall – and express it more or less telegraphically. In titling his descriptions as haiku, Richard instructs the reader to keep the natural world consciously in mind, making it a key element in the consideration and of his work.

At the same time as Richard writes down his profound connection to the Louisiana countryside, he also expresses a deep and abiding regard for his community, his friends and his family. We first see them in “To my ancestors,” where Richard, drunk, goes out to look for his namesake, his uncle's grave in the middle of the night. Other glimpses of community life follow, parties (“First meeting”, “La Fête des Acadiens”), festivals (“Good place”), deaths (“Rain”). Less explicitly, the lay of Richard's neighborhood is woven into his poems, ever-present in the locative markers he sprinkles throughout his descriptions: “toward your place,” “by Mrs. Roger's place,” “at Pauline's place.” The total effect is of a close-knit group of neighbors, ready marker-points in Richard's mental geography.

Where the first portion of the collection focuses on nature, the final portion of *Take in the harvest* tackles the issue of French in Louisiana. The five-part “Stubborn” gives us a first taste of Richard's intensity, as he commiserates with Jean Arceneaux (a fellow writer and friend) about the struggle to maintain a unique French identity in Louisiana. This first introduction lays out the framework for other poems to come, introducing themes that will be elaborated later in the collection. First, Richard comments on the tension between France, the metropole, and the other regions of the francophone world, saying that here in Louisiana, the Cajuns “don't speak blueblood French anymore,” and apologizing sarcastically for using the common word 'mirror' instead of the more formal, classical 'looking glass'. This theme is further explored in “Shotgun Shells,” whose main premise is the difference between 'standard' French and the local dialect, as revealed in an advertising gaffe.

Richard closes the poem in angry, desperate tones, expressing the anguish of the linguistically abandoned: “From the island of my revenge / I call to you at the top of my lungs /

'Don't leave me all alone.'" He further proclaims his intent to never let up, to always remain a thorn in the side, "Because we're stubborn / And we are going to win." These same ideas come to greater fruition in "The truth might hurt you." In this poem, the author's desire has passed from simple annoyance to full-blown anger; he would like to "plant / a bomb at Lafayette Electric, / burn the Oil Center," "take the bishop hostage to our rage." Nevertheless, Richard's ire is more nuanced here. While he initially, in "Stubborn," seems to place the blame for the current situation on the anglophone majority ("But we are all / Colonized, o.k."), he now finds fault with Cajuns themselves, "Victims of ourselves / strangled by our own hands." He calls out society types who are, according to him, all talk and no action: "You say save French at tea parties / little finger raised stinking of politesse," finally giving a fervent ultimatum: "Speak French, or die damned."

And therein lies the central problem. How can one dare to translate poetry that specifically prohibits such an act? I will be honest: the problem simply didn't occur to me at the outset. I was far too enamored with the poems themselves, and with the challenge of translating them faithfully, to consider the higher-level moral aspects of the work. The reasoning came to me as an end result of the mechanical process of translation, and I will present it here in the same way.

Upon deciding to translate *Take in the Harvest*, I first had to figure out what I was working with. Although I had read the poems, I am not the sort of reader who performs a formal analysis while initially reading, so that was the first task. At first blush, it seemed fairly simple: no meter, no rhyme scheme – true free verse. This is true on a certain level, as none of the poems in *Take in the Harvest* conform to any traditional poetic form. There are no sonnets here, no blank verse, no alexandrins, not even any metrical haiku. Still, all of the poems have internally coherent

rhythms, as one would expect from a musician-poet. Richard himself reveals the key, whether intentionally or not, in “First meeting”: “Poetry is / Often silence,’ / said Isabelle.”

Isabelle is correct, and Richard's poetry reflects this Phillip Glassian thought. The poems in *Take in the harvest* are not governed by iambs or trochees, but rather by the inevitability of the carriage return. Many of the poems, if the linebreaks were removed, would read as straightforward prose sentences, as in the case of “The difference”: “The difference between / yesterday night / and tonight / is that yesterday / there were bullfrogs, / but tonight, / there are none.” The difficulty lay in reconciling the rhythm of the original with my translated rhythm. For comparison's sake, here is the original text (Richard 77):

La différence entre
Hier au soir
Et ce soir
C'est que hier
Y'avait des ouaouarons,
Pis ce soir,
Y'en a pas.

Most of the lines, with a proper Louisiana accent, have only three syllables. The only exceptions are the first line and the fifth line, both for good reason: the first line states the theme of the poem, and the fifth reveals the distinction between the nights.

My first draft of the translation was unforgivingly literal, a quick run-through to get a basic shape down (and I will admit that it was never committed to paper; this is a reconstruction of a somewhat instinctual process):

The difference between
Yesterday in the evening
And this evening
Is that yesterday
There were bullfrogs,
But this evening,
There are none.

In addition to sounding translated, the unrelenting 'this evening's completely destroyed any possibility of trisyllabic lines, so I made a few substitutions and tried again:

The difference between
 Yesterday night
 And tonight
Is that yesterday
 There were bullfrogs,
 But tonight,
There are none.

The slight shift from 'evening' to 'night' (more suitable to normal American English usage, anyway) solved some of the excesses, but still left some lines that were originally trisyllabic instead tetra- or, heavens forfend, pentasyllabic. The dilemma took on a different tone now, because the fact of the matter is that I liked it this way, and yet it was 'wrong'. I am inclined to agree with Willis Barnstone, both that “A translation is never an exact copy. It is DIFFERENT” and that, as he quotes Fray Luis de León, translated poems should appear “nacidas en él y naturales' (as if born and natural in the language)” (both 266). Armed with this ready rationale, I was prepared to accept the above form, but I still wanted to know why it worked. As it turns out, while the total number of syllables differs, the underlying stress patterns align perfectly, at least in my pronunciation of American English: 2 2 1 2 2 1 1; these are the number of stressed syllables in each line. While I have not used stress patterns as a litmus test for judging the 'correctness' of my translations, I do find that once I am happy with a poem the patterns tend to be reasonably in sync.

I have referred multiple times above to my personal idiosyncrasies of speech. There are certainly those who would gasp in horror at the concept of my voice, the translator's voice, insinuating itself into the original work – Nabokov comes to mind as an extreme example.

Unfortunately for the gaspers, I disagree. I certainly do not wish to imply that the author's voice should ever become obscured by the translator's own, especially in two such closely related languages as French and English, drawing on a common wordstock and intertwined literary traditions. Nevertheless, I have felt free to be swayed by my own preferences and turns of speech in cases where they seem to meld with Richard's own. Take, for example, the case of "Haiku for a rainy afternoon." In the poem's first two lines, "Grands coups de tonnerre / Tombés dans la cour tout près" (Richard 71), I had a choice in how to translate 'tout près'. I could have said 'fell close by in the yard', shifting the adverb from the end of the sentence, or I could have weakened the meaning slightly to 'very close', again shifting, or any of a number of other methods. In the end, I chose to translate the adverbial phrase as "right close," which had a double virtue. First, it allowed me to maintain the original word order, with a final adverb. Second, it sounded to me like something I myself might write, even though I'm fairly sure the phrase wouldn't be in the active vocabulary of many other translators. It resonated with me on my own terms, just as the original French did.

Which leads me around to the problem of French words. Richard provides a glossary in his original collection, so that (as he puts it) 'foreigners' will be able to understand certain Louisiana specific lexical items. Originally I had the wild idea that I would search for English dialect words that would be equally as foreign to the broader anglophone readership as their French counterparts. Fortunately, I think, for everyone, I discarded this plan. *Unfortunately*, I did so in favor of the equally as disastrous retention of all dialect words, italicized and in French, in the English text, thus rendering otherwise perfectly transparent, enjoyable lines needlessly abstruse. Luckily for everyone involved I was disabused of the notion that I should try to render

the exact same reader experience in my English translation as in the French original; down such a road lies only madness. As Christopher Middleton puts it, “Translation does involve interpretation” (125). Gregory Rabassa quotes Jorge Lu s Borges putting it even better, in telling his translator “not to write what he said but what he wanted to say” (2). As it is, I left only two of the glossary words untranslated, for reasons of aesthetics and rhythm, in “To my ancestors” and in “Bridge Down.” The glossary, however, has remained for much the same reasons as the original: there are flora and fauna that appear in the poems that may not be familiar to all readers, as well as a couple of cultural-specific customs. I have also transferred Richard's spelling of his home state's name to the English language, since I find 'Louisiana' to be just as eye-pleasing as he does 'Louisiane'.

In the end, it was my hemming and hawing over how to tackle dialect words that led me to an understanding of why I should dare to translate these proudly French poems. On word-level, I was unsuccessful in transmitting the Louisiana French experience to the anglophone reader. On a higher, metatextual level, however, I can still be successful. The plain truth is that Zachary Richard's words express, at times brusquely, at times poignantly, but always powerfully, his deep feelings on the status of his French language in the state of Louisiana. If there is to be any change (and we know from his words in “The truth might hurt you” that he wants there to be), it will necessarily involve the anglophones of the state, as well as the many Louisianans of French heritage who no longer speak or read their ancestral tongue.

George Steiner has opined that “Swift, agreed understanding between neighbouring nation states and ideologically divided communities is necessary to the survival of man” (211). To this list we could well add linguistically divided communities, such as we have in Louisiana. The

only way that the non-francophones of Louisiana will know this valuable statement on the worth of Cajun French is through translation, and I offer up my efforts. I could close with another Steiner quote, “No man must be kept from salvation by mere barriers of language” (257), but instead I will send this translation off with the same words as its original author: “Prepare the field. Burn the cane.”

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Zachary Richard's "Faire récolte"

Take in the Harvest

I live on ten acres of land in the heart of the Louisiana countryside, but despite the garden and the orchard, I don't earn enough money from my harvest to claim to be a farmer (the real ones don't make money either). This title is, therefore, a way for me to legitimize myself to my neighbors. I'm going to give them copies and tell them the title, and since they can't read French (Cajuns are for the most part illiterate in their language) I'll be able to make them believe that it's a farmer's almanac and I'll win prestige in my little corner of the world. Or perhaps, they won't understand anything and it will only confirm their suspicion: that I am strange. Nevertheless, I associate this collection very deliberately with the farmer, the man of the earth. Not because I live in an agricultural area, or that my ancestors all lived off the land, in Louisiana, in Acadia, or even further back in France, not because the themes of my poems are often provoked by nature, but because the farmer's work is symbolic, for me, of poetic creation. Symbolic in an obvious and superficial way (planting the seed, working the field, and taking in the harvest, just like receiving inspiration, working the verse, and finishing it; or perhaps that agriculture and poetry provide nourishment, one for the body, the other for the mind), but symbolic also in a deeper way. With poetry, as with agriculture, you're engaged in a collaboration with forces that can become, with different conditions, adversaries or allies. In both cases, the farmer and the poet act in a spiritual dimension where certain elements remain mysterious and uncontrollable. A part of the success of the farmer, like that of the poet, depends on a power, an energy that you can neither describe nor imagine, but that you try to join with and guide in a positive fashion.

For the benefit of foreigners, I include a glossary of local words at the end of the book.

Sleepless night in Moncton
to Gérald Leblanc

Candid women with
 Firm breasts the
 Beauty of love
The night
 Tumultuous I am
 Against your mouth
Against your will
 Running away from holding
 Myself to you I am
Against you the space
 That you give
 Me between
Your Top Lip and
Your Bottom Lip.

At dawn the trace
 Of orange that
 Precedes the white.

II.

Tonight I saw you
 As through a glass darkly.
 I call to you like
A wolf on
 The mountain the
 Wings of sadness,
Voyage at half-moon
 The leaves already
 Changing.

17 September 1980, Lorne Crescent.

Haiku for the second day of autumn

Second day of autumn

First cold snap.

Blue sky no clouds.

23 September 1980, Montreal.

Afterthought:

To feel the void

To fill it

Without violating it.

Haiku for the third day of autumn

Rainy day
 Just good for
 Going to bed
Making love two or three times.

(She said that soon
 There won't be any more leaves
 On the trees.)

Haiku for the fifth day of autumn

A last look
 To say it all
 What you won't
 Ever have the time
 To say.

Trois-Rivières, 27 September 1980, to CT.

Long-haiku for the killdeer

At the setting of the sun

 Killdeer flew toward the west,

 Seeking out grasshoppers for supper.

6 November 1980, at Chênes du Marais.

Haiku for the risen full moon

On the east horizon
The full moon rising,
To the west, the setting sun.

The last day of winter, 19 March, North Scott Ghetto.

Haiku for the first day of Spring

I love you I love you I love you
I love you I love you I love you
I love you I love you I.

At the woodyard

Hot all day
 Except toward three
 Thirty in the afternoon
The north wind
 Threw itself across the field.

We saw it come
 Great wave of ice
 Low dark sky
Gray coming from over
 By Mrs. Roger's house.

The old carpenters
 whistled through their teeth,
 “Oh yeah, it's starting
 to get cold!”

And not long after,
 They put up their tools
 And they left.

12 December 1980, during the construction of my house, at Chênes du Marais.

Cries on the bayou

As if it's too late,
As if the battle was lost,
Everyone near to
Going back to shore and
Running to hide in the great wood.
As if no seed
Grew in the earth,
Dry and powdery,
And St. Medard's Day announced itself
Ruthlessly.
As if nothing,
Even well-anchored things,
Could resist
Being hurled
From one side to the other
In the wind great like
The Biggest Hurricane.
As if charity and hope
Had abandoned us,
And neither men,
Nor animals, nor plants,
Nor rocks, nor microbes,
Nor atoms, nor tiny traces
Understood each other, but rather threw
Grimaces and insults,
Treasons and injuries and
Fists in the dark,
Grinding teeth, red eyes,

And the courageous
Had all fallen
Like white oaks
At the end of their days,
Leaving a savage
Coffin-silence
Smothering inspiration,
Removing everything,
Even conceptions
of the destruction we endured.

When the wind
Fell abruptly,
Suddenly spreading silence
like a fog
of pestilence and blackness,
greater silence
Than could have ever
Smashed into
South-west Louisiana,
I heard a cry.

A cry on the bayou
Like I had never heard.
Strong and resounding
Like a gator in the depths of the swamp
Like the king of gators
His lungs filled with music
Splendid like the cry of a nighthawk
Courting in the evening,
Like a kestrel
In the depths of the sky,
A tranquil, handsome cry,
Like an angel,
like the voice of god
Speaking to his lover
After making love:
A cry coming from
far far away,
far far in the bayou.

And my heart started
To beat like to
Break my ribs,
And without making the smallest noise,
I looked around me,
Furtive, wondering if
Someone else
Had heard it

Too.

29 January 1981, North Scott Ghetto.

To my ancestors

Searching for my uncle
To give him a little drink
From my bottle,
Soothe a great thirst.

My dear grandmother
Who no longer wanted to see me,
Drunk like a *tchoque*,
In the middle of the night
Looking for
His tomb
In the middle
of the cemetery.

Gone far away in
Uncertainty,
Tchoque.

Sacrifice.

*30 January 1981, to the late Zachary Richard, born 8 September 1913,
died 23 February 1936.*

In their holes

Raining tonight
Big drops of rain
Late near to quarter of three
Half-moon hidden
By the dark, heavy sky
Wetness nothing
Moving
Apart from the crawfish
In their holes.

22 February 1981, 2:45 a.m., North Scott Ghetto.

Near-haiku for the Canada geese

Two Canada geese beating
Against the north wind.
Disappearing into each other.

(Saturday just at noon
Wind rose up.
Rained all
Evening.
Thunder in the night.
Ate gumbo at Pauline's,
Uncle Badé dying.
West wind
Shook the cabin.
Turned into north
Wind.)

2 March 1981.

Haiku for the hard spring rain

Sky the color of lead and
In the night fat rain
Fell on the house.

29 March 1981, North Scott Ghetto.

Owl in the night

Owl in the night
reminds me of
the first
time.

1st of April, 1981, North Scott Ghetto.

Thirty-three egrets

Easter Day

 Thirty-three egrets

 Flew over

The house.

Haiku for the April drought

Dry and merci-
 Less days, fat
 Clouds gone by
Without sparing a drop.

22 April 1981.

First meeting

I was the first to arrive
 Earlene arrived
 Second every-
Body came
 After that.
 Lots of
Strangers we talked
 We discussed
 Richard Guidry
Argued at least
 Two times, once
 With me,
Certainly. Jean Arceneaux
 had brought
 birds
And catfish and we
 ate deciding
 To make an
Evening of it from time to time.

Drunks in the front
 Room making noise
 Amusing ourselves much
Too late. (Lucky there weren't
 any neighbors).

Carl Doucet
 left early, worried
 about his baby,
Me, I got as drunk
 as a jaybird.

“Poetry is
 often silence,”
 said Isabelle.

First day in May

Great storms out of the north
 Lightning thunder and
 Lots of rain.
The crickets sang
 Their throats finally
 Wet enough,
Choir of bullfrogs
 Resounded across
 The flooded earth.

Haiku for St. Medard's Day

St. Medard's Day cloudy without rain
Sun shone most of the time.

Sowing grass in the yard. 8 June 1981.

Take in the harvest

It's hot enough to
 Sap all your courage,
Rained in the afternoon making
 The grass grow.
The farm all in order,
 Except in the hollow of the Swamp.

If it rains this way,
 At day's end not
Before noon, harvest will be
 all big and magnificent.

If there's no
 hurricane.

*27 July 1981, at Chênes du Marais.
(On the night of the 22nd, returning to Louisiana, heat and stifling humidity. Jefferson, St. John,
St. James, Ascension, East Baton Rouge, West Baton Rouge, Iberville, St. Martin, and Lafayette,
tired and almost drunk on the night road).*

End-Goodbye-O.K.

*I have chosen to destroy
The images of those who
Have come before me, Amon
Re of Egypt, of the
Ancient, evil crypt
The moon over Abitibi
Pow Wow Force Great
Vast Northern Road Lunatic
Hope to find your
Number in the sky I
Believe that we are lost I
Believe that we are
Better separated by the ocean before
Me between you and me
The ocean, vast and full of
Waves without it we'd be
Lost already.*

Wherever you are,
I'll be there too.

Filled with joy.

Filled with pain.

19 August 1981, Ottawa, Canadian Capital. Without having eaten, to Gaston and Gerry, lost in the fog.

Big rush

Big rush
In the alleyway
My tabernacle
My Open House
My Last Drop of
Solace Thirst
The fabric of the night
Wound around
My head,

The enraged beast.

Montreal, 31 August 1981, 3:50:01 a.m., 18° Celsius.

Fish

Autumn flowers
Blue, violet and yellow,
Young catfish in
The creek.

18 September 1981.

Good spot

Canré Fontenot at the
Festival Acadien. Came
late and drunk,
Dog-tired and miserable. Cloud
of dust mirage above
the dancers magic of the
Crowd, scratch out a good spot,
Push if you have to.

Bois-Sec played and Monsieur
Octa and Hector Duhon,
D. L. Menard and
Canré, because nobody wanted him
With us.

19 September 1981.

Haiku for the end of September

End of September

Hot day blue sky

Without a hint

Of autumn.

25 September 1981.

After so much drought

After so much drought
The rain is finally falling
This afternoon.

The weather changes.
Fresh wind from the north.

1 October 1981, at Chênes du Marais.

22 November

(Rain all night,
Rain all day).

Raining since
 This morning
 The rain
Coming on even
 Harder with
 Nightfall,
The wind
 Picking up fat
 Drops like
Nails struck
 The roof and
 Swampland everywhere.

At Chênes du Marais.

Near-haiku 25 November

(Cloud cover breaking and gone)

There's wind
 But it's stopped
 Raining.

*Toward nine in the evening
The rain started
My poor house not yet finished
The planks of the rafters
Night wardens
Alone and sad, in the middle
Of the naked prairie.
I'm afraid the rain
Will swell up the wood too much.
It's turning cold too,
The wild hand of winter.*

Coldest Day Of The Winter

Raining all day

 If it was just a little bit

 Colder, it would turn to hail.

4 February 1981, North Scott Ghetto.

Fog

Fog so thick
That all the rabbits
Miss the
Headlights
On the cars
Up until
It's too late.

January 1981, at Chênes du Marais.

Young wolf

I see light
 high in this
 city building
I see the moon
 I hear his cry
 from the mountain
echoing
 on its third or
 fourth passing
no clouds to
 hide himself
 no more instinct
 to save himself
young wolf
 paw in the trap.

why do you call me
 if it's only
 to tell me
that you don't love me anymore.

Montreal, 9-10 October 1981.

Gray

North wind whistled
Large across the planks
Winter coming on.

Gray winter wind color
of an old knife.

II

Day colored like lead
clearing up in the afternoon
fogging over at the fall
of night.

Hunters in the pasture
The neighbor's grandmother
Passes into the infinite.

17 and 25 October 1981. At Chênes du Marais.

Haiku for picking beans

Picking beans
 This afternoon,
 Little rabbits
Ran everywhere.

29 October 1981.

Haiku for the first crawfish sighting

After two days of rain
Clouds broke crawfish
Left their holes.

4 November 1981, at Chênes du Marais.

Fog on the swamp

Fog on the swamp
 Solitude in the haze
 I hear your name
Like a cat who
 Meows all night
 Like a man
Alone in the haze
 We're fucked
 No appeal
Your love envelops
 My soul like
 This fog
Envelops my sight.

last quarter waxing
the moon in Cancer
mosquitoes in November.

Eleventh month T'ai. Flock of duck flying north at nightfall.

Heat

Raining

Softly like

Melted cloud.

3 December 1981, Moving from the Ghetto.

Fog

Fog so thick
 it could break a hammer
Cutting softly
 through the middle.

You see fewer shooting stars
 with this little half-moon.

You hardly see the
 road at all.

You're trapped in a grayness,
 heavy and wet,
After playing in Opelousas
 Friday and Saturday in a row.

Ill-thought, ill-meant, ill-made,
 game cock crowing his own reveille
In the wee hours of the morning.

Cocks crowing at 3:33 a.m., North Scott Ghetto.

Hard rain

Great wind from the south heavy
 With rainclouds,
 Hard rain on the swamp.

(Moon in Sagittarius,
Mercury don't move).

22 January 1981, to Stevie Ray Vaughan.

Cold

Back to Monkville
 In the snow,
 White on white.
St-Ignace, Bouctouche
 Just a useless old man coming home
 Too late at night.
Black ice the next day,
 Encrusting my route
 Heels slip-sliding,
Rolling softly to
 Keep from falling
 Snow trap invisible in
This great season,
 Haven't been this cold
 In such a long time.

2 February 1981, Moncton.

At Louis Mailloux's

At Louis Mailloux's,
 In Caraquet on the point
 Boats stuck in
The ice, circling
 The bay, the fishermen
 Shoveling snow
In front of their houses.

Gust of wind in
 This white world
 Cut the silence
Like Poseidon's
 Frozen knife.

5 February 1981.

Plowing

Plowing the fields,
Scaring the rabbits,
Turning the soil and
The flowers of Spring.

Blue cloudless sky.
Already hot.

Tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers,
Transplanted and already in the garden,

Summer work starting.

18 March 1981, at Chênes du Marais, to the god of war.

Annunciation

(The Holy Spirit came upon the Virgin Mary)

If the weather's fine,
 the harvest will be good.
(The sky was full of clouds but
 it didn't rain.
At least during
 the day).

Threat of rain at seven-fifteen
The wind fell as suddenly
 as it appeared.

Lightning to the north and
 the east, wind stopping up
The thunder's mouth.

25 March 1981, at Chênes du Marais.

Drought

Drought seven times seven days
Dusty earth covered
Every little thing
Dust stayed in your throat
On your tongue in your eyes
Not to mention the heat,
Blinding, flesh under sun
so merciless.

Strong, strong and hot
Burned the summer.
Drought without end
Drought just too

Long.

11 June 1981, Moon in Capricorn.

The rainbow

Rained in the afternoon

 Rain like a beautiful

 Woman dancing before

My leaves.

 Her curves undulated

 Around leaves, trunk

and root. Her mouth pregnant

 with wetness, her kisses

 Planted on my plants.

Rainbow

 North South on

 the eastern horizon.

16 June 1981, at Chênes du Marais.

If there be a rainbow in the eve

It will rain and leave.

Two rainbows

Back in Louisiana
Rained off and on
For three days.

Montreal Ottawa Rain Radio Studio
Montreal Playing In The Street.

Two rainbows
Overhead.

Rain

North wind
South wind
Rain like a
Pill that the country
Swallows every
Eight hours.

Rained every afternoon
Every day.
And tonight
Near one in the morning
Still raining.

Fine rain good
For plants leaves
Branches and fruits.

Aunt Mathilde passed on,
Cradled in the arms of the Lord
Whom she loved so much.

Sky overcast and
Often, rain.

28 June 1981, at Chênes du Marais.

Dark haiku

Fog on the swamp
It's never been more
Dark than that.

7 July 1981, at Chênes du Marais.

Haiku for the first half moon in summer

Half moon

 Rocked in the high sky

 By Jupiter, Saturn, and

Mars.

La Fête des Acadiens

Jean Arceneaux sleeps
in his bed not
hearing the
bark of the dog.

Zachary Richard hears it
coming back from the dance
tonight two hundred years
Barks, the wisdom
of the love-drunk
Love-jealousy.

Over Pauline Boudreaux's party
half moon and
a lone dog barking.

26 December

Rained, hard rain, in the morning,
 The neighbor's cows
 On a threatened island.
The water still rising.

All the mice in the countryside will want
 To come in the house.
Never so much water so near
 The farm.

At Chênes du Marais, 1981.

Hail

South wind like a punch
From a big, strong man, by God.
West wind, cold and gray,
Color of dark ice, met
the Mexico current,
Tornado watch
On the prairie.

(St. Augustine went
off adventuring. We
ask for any news from
him, we hope for the
best, we fear the worst.
We hope that he'll
come home soon.)

Cold front,
Warm front,
High altitude battle
Over Louisiana.

31 January 1983, at Chênes du Marais.

Ash Wednesday haiku

Gray day like
 a layer of lead
 Covering the earth,
Weighing on my mind.

First buds

First buds of Spring
songs on the tips of the peach tree
the fig tree, the mulberry tree.
I hear their refrain,
“Winter is over, greenery comes.”

Only the pecan tree doesn't sing.

3 March 1983, at Chênes du Marais.

Sunday afternoon laziness

On the feast of St. Boniface,
Rained softly
All afternoon.

Laziness and just the desire
To do nothing at all.

6 May 1983.

Stubborn

Loudmouth, firebrand, révolutionnaire,
My fellow man, mon frère,
I salute you, I embrace you.

We don't speak blueblood French anymore,
Here we say whatever we must
To make ourselves understood
Hear me out,
My grandmother spoke
the king's language
But we are all
Colonized, o.k.
It comes and it goes.

Poets talking to each other
in the bistros
of Paris
Drinking several glasses.

Looking in the mirror,
(pardon, I mean to say "looking glass"!)
I saw the enemy
Tonight as if
He was sitting
On the porch
In front of your house.

Beggar, firebrand, traitor
 Looking in your glass
 What is it that
You saw?
 you and I are
Capsized
Cancelled
Expired
Invalid now
 and soon
Forgotten
 I salute you
 I embrace you.

II

Heart like a horse,
 A racehorse, regular beat
 Long distance and
High plateau.
 One foot in front of the other
 For a long time.

III

North South East West
Spring Summer Autumn Winter
Right Left Before Behind
Above Below Before After

IV

From the island of my revenge
I call to you at the top of my lungs
“Don't leave me all alone.”
Come find me lost here
In this great black wood
If I had the wings of a dove
I'd fly across the sky
To your side.

The message of our salvation
Was enshrouded in an
Unknown language, lost since ancient times.

Again, mon frère, you got yourself drunk
On the power of your words
Hiding yourself behind
A Mardi Gras mask.
Nom de plume worn once a year
On the eve of Lent.

V

Five times tonight

I went

To your bedside

To watch over your fever

To give you water.

You called me by my name,

Grown more and more

Feeble through those

Dry, chapped lips,

“Water, fresh water,

To drink, fresh water to drink”.

Bawler, Squawler, Enemy, Friend,

Soft music played long past day's end

Beating of mysterious rhythms

The legacy you share with me

Day after day until death

Neither you nor I have

Any reason to do the stupid things

We've done

That we've always done. That we'll do

Again.

Together and each to his corner

Because we're stubborn

And we are going to win.

To Jean Arceneaux, Friday 7 March 1986, after “l'occasion de l'Apostrophe.” Beware the Ides of March.

Haiku for a rainy afternoon

Great claps of thunder
Fell in the yard right close,
East wind and rain.

*21 August 1986, at Chênes du Marais
two loud claps right close to the house made me jump.
the wind brusquely changed direction, the hard rain flooding in
the east window I thought I'd closed. hard rain for a quarter of an hour.
then a soft color in the sky and freshness impregnated everywhere.*

It was raining in the fireplace

It was raining in the fireplace
The fire stronger at first.

It was raining in the fireplace
Northeast wind
At a bad angle.

22 December 1986, at Chênes du Marais.

I took a chair

I took a chair
 To sit, my Lord,
Under your light blue canopy
 To sit in your garden
To contemplate the colors of your winter.

A windless day,
 Not a bit of ruckus on the prairie
Except for the dogs barking at the arriving guests,
 The evening visits beginning
Madame in the kitchen, Monsieur dragging wood
 For the fire.

My Christmas gift, I received it
 Sitting in my garden, my Lord,
Up high, light blue and birdsong,
 Pale yellows, rust and orange
Worn-out green and the shadows growing longer
 On the ground.

24 December 1986, at Chênes du Marais.

The Lighthouse

Like the lighthouse
 Of a harbor seen
From a boat navigating
 The prairie,
The light of
 My neighbor's
Porch,
 Seen from afar.

As if
 Everything was going well,
As if
 I was returning from a
Trip.

28 May 1987, at Chênes du Marais, to Hubert Maître.

The 12th of July

Firefly on the porch,
Little surprised light.

Lightning on the horizon
To the north and
To the west.

27 July 1987, at Chênes du Marais.

Did you happen to see her?

I saw a firefly
Leaving toward the north-east, leaving toward your place
Did she get there?

Her light like a shard
In the corner of my eye
That I would have missed
Without my drunkenness,
A shooting star
A fixed perception,
The truth existing,
Or perhaps being projected
Onto the sky pasted
Above my view
Looking that way,
When I saw her
Leaving toward your place.

1 August 1987, at Chênes du Marais.

The difference

The difference between
 Yesterday night
 And tonight
Is that yesterday
 There were bullfrogs,
 But tonight,
There are none.

16 August 1987, at Chênes du Marais.

Poem for you

Stars all over the sky

That night

Thinking of you.

Transplanting

You have to transplant in November
After the sap
Has stopped flowing.

Making love under the covers,
Winter is calling.

II

Crossing the field,
I glanced over
To see how
Things were going at your place
The smoke from your fireplace,
Lit like mine.

Cutting wood for
The woodpile.

III

At 4:33 in the morning
26 and a half days without rain
And it finally pours.

IV

The night of the full moon,
On the lakeshore dancing.

*7 November 1987, at Chênes du Marais,
passed the evening in Lake Arthur.*

Booby-trapped trap

to Jean Arceneaux

Fireflies like stars,
 Shooting in from the side
 Gone toward your place again.
You must have
 A booby-trapped trap.

12 May 1988, at Chênes du Marais.

Arrow

Across this prairie
 The night like
 A love-arrow
Trace of red
 On the tip
 Of your mouth
That burns
 Your brown eyes
 That drive me to distraction.

23 April 1988, 2:40 a.m., at Chênes du Marais.

The shadow

The wind is
 on the prairie
 like the shadow
Of a stray dog
 the traveller returning
 from the other shore.
Silence in this
 big house only
 haze outside.

18 December 1987, at Chênes du Marais.

First fireflies of the season

First fireflies of the season.

I saw one at Pauline's place,
I saw two at mine.

28 April 1989, Chênes du Marais.

First grasshopper of the season

Wednesday the first
 grasshopper,
Today the first
 fireflies of the season.

They were three
 coming across
 the pasture
 the neighbor's dog
Driven mad by their
 light and I
Barked, too, toward that
 icy moon.

19 April 1991, at Chênes du Marais.

A Lenten wind

A Lenten wind
 whistling across the prairie
 Fast cloud crossing
The face of the moon.

Black cat, color of
 The shadow of the night.

18 February 1989, at Chênes du Marais.

Traveler's song

At night, the oaks
 Stand guard like the
 Sentries of a
Beneficent army and
 The myrtles throw
 Their torches of enlightened,
Welcome flowers
 Brought back from the war
 Traveled so long,
Finally arrived.

20 July 1990, at Chênes du Marais.

Drinking song

At six in the morning
 The day of Mardi Gras
 No more music playing
 No more fire in the chimney
All the revelers snoring
 Me leaving all alone.

Carnaval 1988.

Never let go

Leave the road tomorrow,
 Today the night
 Rain in the morning
Chasing after clarity
 The beating of my heart
 The white heat
Of your love.

We are lost children
 Bound to fall
 Bound to find ourselves
Bound to make love
 Like we're bound to die
 The rain that
Hits the window
 Sleepless night
 Paradise of the fucked.

Here in folly's grotto
 Cursed poet and me
 Drinking coffee
Afraid to go to sleep
 Fleeing sleep never
 Let go never
Let go.

Three verses for you

I

Two fireflies frolicking
 in the rain
 No mosquitoes
Or almost none,
 the summer was
 surprising, the seasons
Not like they should have been
 at evening it's
 being alone
That's hard.

II

The crickets are
 content the rain
 contented them
Their noise like
 the motor of the good lord
at night.

III

Even without mosquitoes
 there are always some
 the evenings aren't
Bad but
 at night they
 are more
Evident.

To CT, 21 August 1988, at Chênes du Marais.

Dancing woman

You, because
 You are a dancing woman,
 You dance. You are
One with the universe. You are
 The wind and the rain
 You are in me
As if in my diaphragm
As if in my belly
As if in my eyes
As if in my tongue
As if in my veins
As if in my legs

and now, the dance.

That makes many times now
 That I've asked you
 To follow my steps.
But it never works.

22 July, Panama.

Creole baby

The altar of this heat
 Night's prey,
 Young girls
Full of sweat
 The odor of sex
 Their hips,
Handles for my pleasure,
 Held in my hand
 Smile perceived through
Cloud of drunkenness,
Pressed against your stomach,
Feeling your breasts through
Your wet dress.

Easter morning

Silence on the prairie
 Bathed in the soap of the
 Moon.
Crickets sing
 Waking the mockingbird
 Blue song and
First fireflies
 Of the season.

19 April 1992, at Chênes du Marais.

Suddenly winter

Suddenly winter the
 Hunter flying in
 The air blood
Running between your legs
 Between your eyes
 Between your lips
The fever
 Took me after
 Midnight a few days
Before Christmas I called
 Your name too often
 Like an emergency
Exit like
 A savage
 Wood the clouds
Stuck against the
 Earth Orion flying
 In the eastern quadrant
The half moon
 Set
 In the west.

*13 December 1988, 11:41 p.m., at Chênes du Marais.
To Sirius, the Dog Star.*

At the beginning of October

At the beginning of October
the crickets still sang
but it wasn't hot
like before.

2 October, at Chênes du Marais.

Bridge Down

The bridge on the road
 Going to Louis Arceneaux's
 Is closed.
The parish is out of money,
 Nothing's the same,
 And I'm lost
At the end of Cockpit Road.

It's a strange summer,
 No mosquitoes on
 July 27th
Despite the rain
 That's fallen on our hopes
 For a long time
Already.

It's a strange summer,
 A pilgrim returned from afar,
 Sitting on my porch
The morning the stinging caterpillar
 Stung me, his accomplice
 At hell's airport
Wished me good day
 Despite his hatred, and
 On the bridge
Going to Louis Arceneaux's,
 A barrier of *tchéroqués*
 Stops me from going
Farther.

There are chicken trees
 Growing up
 Through the asphalt, and
On the hillside lightning
 Lightens the country.
 I only think of you
Running across the field
 Approaching the bayou,
Plunging in, falling
 Into the heart of the water
As if onto the blade of a rusted knife,
 Torn, finding you under the bridge
Barrier of big thorns
 All around.

I only think of you.
 I heard a cry,
 It went “smack”
When you fell, the sound
 Of your hands and your nose
 Your eyes hit
The bottom, while I hoped
 In front of the bridge, held back from going forward,
 My fists tied down, my temerity
Sunk in the mud.

I thought to myself:
 They abandoned the bridge,
 There's no more money,
And yet for a hundred years
 We've crossed it, and yet for
 Still longer
We've spoken Louis Arceneaux's French
 In this country, plucked
 Like a duck
In his pot, the pride
 Of those who are stronger,
 Of those who surprised us
On the lowlands one winter morning.
 They're going to eat us,
 Seasoned with weakness
And with shame.

In front of the bridge
 Going to Louis Arceneaux's,
 I can't go
Any farther, the shadow of your cry
 Passes like a crow
Leaving a gray streak
 On this heart,
Torn by the spines
 Of the *tchéroqués*.

On the west end of the bridge
 Going to Louis Arceneaux's
 And you
On the other side.

Winter is here

Winter is here
In the middle of the afternoon
Great big cloud the color of steel
Chasing a flock of blackbirds
An owl and some partridges.

The wind turns over the buckets
In the yard and
Not long after,
Cold and rain.

29 December 1990, at Chênes du Marais.

Shotgun Shells

For the first time ever
There was an advertisement along
The highway in this lost Louisiana.

In letters the size of steers
It said, in French: "The cartridge that guarantees a lagniappe."
For the first time in history
The Americans published their advertisements in French
And it was for shotgun shells.

It amused me in my bourgeois delinquency,
The sauce from your leg of lamb on my tie,
Burping your old champagne into the north wind.

It amused me since there aren't any hunters
That can read or speak even American
And therefore it wasn't with them the fault lay.

What was still more amusing was that
It was written well, without error, not like usual
Since we have a habit of writing poorly and

Speaking poorly in this no longer French country
Except for a few vestiges like me and
My neighbor who invited me to eat wild game and

Drink wine and coffee at his place,
His wife kissed me good night outside I saw
A billboard like a troupe of angels in

The basin of the sky selling cartridges
For hunters hunting another truth.

II

My neighbor makes a lot of noise at night,
He's a musician. My other neighbor
Goes to bed early. He's a hunter.

Me, I'm just a bon vivant bent over
A society game or a glass of wine
Drunk in the company of gentlemen

Or preferably pretty ladies.
Imagine then my curiosity to see written,
Great like the Bishop's church, French

Without fault except in terms of continent. America, ami,
Doesn't tolerate difference anymore while
Its children can't stop searching for it.

It's a funny thing, like my grandfather
Would have said if he was still with us.
Times change. The wind turns aside.

The cold of souls and hearts
Resounds in shopping malls and
Parking lots, dead at night, more dead

Than the cemetery where my grandfather
Sends me, from the other side,
A well-written message despite himself,

He says to me: "I'm still here, boy,
And my cartridge guarantees a lagniappe."

to Jean Arceneaux, and Kerry Boutté.

Devil in the heart

Devil in my heart
 Betrayed me in
 A friendly town
Lethargic foresight,
 Tranquil like an infant
 Sucking at his mother's breast.
They took me by
 The neck, shook me,
 Heaped all sorts of
Insults on me, threw me,
 Thrown in the street
 The hard pavement
My forehead meeting
 My ruined hopes
 Scattered like
Snow flakes
 Stained with blood
 On a background of
Filth and gray
 I called your name but
 No one answered.

In the almost-night
 In Brussels my nose
 Pressed to the ground
The bourgeois going back
 To their homes, bothered by
 The sign of my weakness
Walking around
 The busdrivers
 Cursing in that

Working-class language my
Two arms on one
Rail my
Two legs on the other.

Crying confusedly
Dirty, hot tears
Making mud
In the streets of
The capital of the beloved
Belgians who
Today don't know
Me anymore the
Queen pisses on
Me her lover won't speak to me
Anymore he who was
My best friend
Not long ago.

But it's my fault
I know it
I acknowledge it
But it doesn't
Hurt any less for
So much wasted love
So many prayers prayed
Even the dogs
No longer sniff
The Queen's piss
Like Gueuze
Dirtying my
Pants, drying in
The wind the whores
In their windows
Now don't even hide
Their laughter.

Cursed where they are
Not the curse of
Poets, the curse
Of lepers the disease
Rotting the tips of my
Fingers falling
Into my beer,
A bit of flesh
Rests delicately
In the bottom of my glass.

I really would have liked to cry out
To throw cobblestones
Through all the windows
Of this rotted city
To rape all the
Bourgeois and to
Shit on the altars
Of the church of their
Indifference.

(the crazy people
meet up in the disco
on the street that opens
On Place St. Vitupière
or perhaps the Cuban
bar next door)

Priest devil black angel
Sends me to the bar
Knowing what
I'm looking for, I wanted
To cry out to
Break the tables
But I stayed silent
Prisoner of my
Impotence and
Of my hypocrisy.

How can I
 Correct it tied up
 By the wrists
And the ankles
 Disgraced
 In the public square
The English sailors
 Spit on me
 Between their insults
I should never have come back
 Leaving the glories
 Of earlier times
To sweep up the dust
 Of forgetfulness a bet,
 Lost, the wet cold
Of this night
 Stuck against my skin
 Like a wound.

I would have wanted it all
 Except that, stepping
 Drunkenly my foot
Stuck in the rails
 The streetcar arriving
 Drift of quarrels
And wine chagrin,
 Pitiless and
Sleepless.

Somewhere in the
 Canadian north,
 Indians
Sing my
 Songs. I won't go
 See them anymore, so that
My memory will remain
 With them as a
 Thing of beauty.

Thirteenth of July

On the thirteenth of July
 I was stung by
 A burning caterpillar
Spent the afternoon
 Laid up suffering
 My arm swollen up
And colored like a watermelon.

After supper, the weather
 Fell on Grand Coteau
 Thunder-cannons
Shook the country
 The earth shaking
 Under the blows
Of an angry sky.

It scared the little animals
 Seeking refuge under houses
 Or hidden in their dens
Dark the night chased by lightning
 The earth lit up
 Like midday
The thunder thundering
 Birds frozen silent
 In the chimney
Their eyes wide open.

Negative positive discharge
 Practical static poetry
 Full of energy and
Ready to explode.

Quite enough rain
 This damnable weather
 The eternal clouds,
Damned this season
 This flooded country despair
 in the marsh thunderbolts
Fell all around.

Long ago but not so long
 Ago, I would have prayed to God
 To save me,
To stop the thunder
 Or maybe to strike me
 Between the eyes.

But this time, I beg
 No one walking in the mud
 Head uncovered my
Chest bare in open provocation
 Kill me, if you can,
 Great Impotent God
Who can do nothing.

I am weary and fatigued
 Weakened by insect venom
 No longer seeking the big one,
Wished for but not received,
 The thunderbolt of my love
 Indifference the
Worst of things.

Better death than boredom
 Tonight it danced all around
 All around except
Near me.

Amour's red (Namur's red), to Arthur Rimbaud

At the Cathedral of the Holy Suffering
 Vomiting up my guts
 The dried crust on my sleeve
While I slept on the ground
 The cold, hard stone
 The pure clarity
Too cruel for this season,
 I love you,
 I slit open my stomach for you,
The smell of shit and alcohol.

Tonight in Namur
 The hidden bourgeois
 Under their covers,
Isolated, truth shown outside
 On the sidewalk but in the bistro:
 The bedeviled, their faces
Lost white colored
 Their blood staining the
 Knife of wild
Intransigence, their teeth
 Black with smoke, their eyes
 Yellow, no recognition

Brussels' hope in the windows
 The whores of the disaffected night
 Their breasts falling their
Hips violet and red
 Love's wound
 On their lips and
On their sexes
 I love you, I love you
 And I want to kill you
Because you have to love,
 Because you have to love
 Someone.

*Taverne du Passage, Brussels, 27 November 1987.
St. Eligius, patron of laborers, make me a good worker.*

Brambles in the snow

Along the wall
 Of my little room
 The snow melts
The brambles drop
 Their leaves burned
 By this first
Frost.

At night on the hill
 Walking on the road
 Neither cat's cry
Nor dog's bark
 Only a calf, steam
 Jumping out from its nostrils
Evaporating across layers
 Of wet black and gray
 The color of late
November.

Party noise, glasses
 Clinking bursts of laughter
 Around a table
Full of joy
 The warmth of laughter
 Filling the window
With steam.

Emerald and burgundy
 Diamond light
 Insouciance in the corner of the
Fire while
 Gnawing dog
 Walks along
The wall, the brambles
 Colored in blood
 In red and in gray
Staining the
 White.

26 November 1987, Namur, Belgium, to Jesus Christ.

The deliveryman

Valiant old villager,

Carouser.

The spark of your eyes

Lit up with whisky,

A pretty melody

A beautiful young girl.

Deliveryman whistling an air

From olden times.

Bringing little packets

Wrapped in bright colors,

Stuffed with warmth.

Wily, asking only

A little bite to eat and

A little sip to drink.

17 June 1992, to Dewey Balfa.

The truth might hurt you

Victims of ourselves

strangled by our own hands
godfather you beat me
speak English don't speak French
don't speak at all. Silence.
shut up, do not disturb. Behave yourself
this time we give ourselves another hiding
beaten with the stick of our sadness
whipped with the switch of our dear suffering:
poor suffering Cajuns
poor Cajuns who lost their country
who lost their language
who lost their pride
who simply lost.

Poor perverted pack of fools

here we say what we want and
I don't give a damn if I've had enough to drink to
reveal to you the truth and the truth is
we're too afraid to break barriers
too afraid to upset our neighbors
we're too civilized, too sterilized,
too americanized, baptised in hypocrisy
folly makes us bend and turn aside
with remorse we dressed ourselves up
as holy martyrs the poor Cajuns
chased out of their poor country in their
poor boats, arriving poor
on the poor shores of this poor river
while my poor grandmother
sang her poor lullaby
while we had nothing to eat
and we were poor.

Pack of fools, I'd like to plant
a bomb at Lafayette Electric,
burn the Oil Center. If we're so
persecuted, let's take the Courthouse
refuge for the refugees of the earth
take the bishop hostage to our rage
if you can drive the car I've got
the matches, you bunch of skirts.

As if we could excuse ourselves
for having let it go as if there were a
reason for our poor lot
other than our poor laziness
and an accommodating lack of balls
pretending to stay within
our idiotic mythology the
poor Cajuns it's not them it's
the English, it's the Americans,
the sons of bitches, but, cher ami,
it's not like that, it's not them,
it's us, it's not him, it's you,
it's not you, son of a bitch, it's
me who did nothing to preserve
French for two hundred years.
it's me who did nothing in 1755,
it's me who chose money
comfort, it's me who's sleeping
it's me who doesn't want to be a bother
it's me, goddammit, it's me.

In 1974, I breathed fire, I rocked the boat,
I cried out alone along the bayou late at night,
the farmers hidden behind closed doors
in their beds their covers covering
their eyes and their ears
and me and my misery in the light of the moon
roaring drunk like the cousin
who drinks too much, who you don't want
to let back in but who you can't
leave outside, afraid he'll break
the bric-à-brac but don't worry,
old hens, I'm behaving, even
presentable my hair spitshined my
suit neat yes sir no ma'am, able
to go into polite society, pack of fools
pack of goddamn ball-less fools, pack of
has-beens, pack of nobodys we don't give a damn
about dressing up like a hundred years ago
playing at being miserable, playing the fool
for American tourists, you think
your grandfather would be proud to see you
in front of your mirror disguised as a shit-
licker you think you're doing well,
My Dear Throwback, coonass coonass
dance like you gotta no gestures above
the waist, don't make mistakes
don't fart at the table.

It's not your fault, it's the Americans'
fault, it's not my fault, it's
your fault, pack of Catholics
gotta find a scapegoat the taste of
shit crushed like a host on
your tongue and in your mouth
singing folk songs of the
Louisiana Cajuns, pack of tonedeaf idiots.
It's not in here, pack of fools,
It's out there, pack of ball-less fools.
It's not the past, pack of lost boys,
it's the future; it's not the elderly,
pack of fools, it's the young.

You say save French at tea parties
little finger raised stinking of politesse
balled-up fists who gives a shit
it's not the French teachers,
it's the terrorists,
it's not the journalists,
it's the morons with matches.

On the altar of the Holy Persecution Complex,
In the name of shit, piss, and the little dick,
Speak French, or die damned.

Handkerchief dance

That night my old grandmother came to dance in the kitchen on the four corners of my handkerchief, making a lot of noise, her mouth melted into a big smile, yelling out little exclamations, clacking her heels on the floor, cursing in good French that nobody had spoken since she left us, provoking my father who got up to yell at us until he saw who it was and went back to bed while me and my old grandmother we danced her jig, me who had so much trouble following her steps her eyes shining like shooting stars. My grandfather came skipping in not long after, we gave him a bottle and the corner by the fire and from time to time he yelled out encouragement but otherwise he stayed quiet because he was buried with his head in the kitchen sink catching the drops that escaped from the faucet. We danced waltzes, two-time waltzes, mazurkas, polkas, and pas de deux and finally a quadrille when their old friends arrived making my father flee, since he couldn't sleep anymore thinking about the next day's work. The noise of the soirée went all the way over to the neighbors' who came to knock on the front door. They brought a violin and some whisky the night we opened all the doors and all the windows after midnight beating on the walls yelling like savages and drinking like fish. My uncles Claude Cinquième and Charlé sang, Badé fell in a corner snoring on the floor, the best drinker in the country. We put potatoes in the coals in the fireplace and from time to time we took one out to eat it but nobody was hungry except my uncle Edvard who said nothing, the road soon filled with two or three hundred people and the yard black with humanity looking most like an anthill. Everybody sang "T'es petite et t'es mignonne" together, several rolled on the ground, others got up on the roof, still others made love in the bramble patches, getting stuck in the ass without really getting hurt. We served biscuits my uncle Cinquième made.

There were so many people that the floor bowed and the roof started to do the same. The yard was full of buggy tracks and the grass was so chopped up that despite the fine, dry weather, people went home with their boots covered in mud. I thought that Papa wouldn't like that, maybe he'd move somewhere where it's quieter where my old grandmother, his mother-in-law wouldn't be able to find us anymore and wouldn't have the occasion to annoy him with her soirées. She held her skirts in her hand her old stockings other times garters fallen down to the eyelets of her old shoes mouth music, smack your lips the biscuits spread their smell like a prayer in the chapel of cooking. Pass me the bottle, ami, I'd like to dance another jig and my heart beat itself apart but my legs stayed tied on jumping like a frog boing boing taking whatever partner for the mishmashed quadrille, color of a worn-out straw hat, smell of farmer sweat, streak of madness between my legs and in my head the liquor of love of drink ecstasy corded like wood near the fire I danced spinning like a top round and round, *marie don marie dé rond ton*, your spinning dancing *é hé hoop pa la la ton ton ron* round and around *é hé hoope la pa la la ton ton ton* round and around *é hé hoop la pa la la ton ton ron ron ron ron* blinded twisted *ron ron marie ro hoop la ton ton* in front behind on the ground standing up on the ground bound in the air roll on the ground burst into laughter, can't stop myself, drinking like nobody's business *é hé ron ron* until I slipped on the handkerchief soaked in my tears and I fell on my ass.

When I woke up at dawn, I was alone with my headache except for my father cleaning around me.

15 January 1993, at Chênes du Marais.

Green oak

Invincible oak

 Roots sent out far all around

Oak, confronter of hurricanes

 The great wind hardly makes you

Bow your head.

Elegance and savage nature

 Shade in summer,

Greenery in winter.

Oak, I'll lie down

 under your branches.

27 December 1994, to Walt Whitman.

I like that

At the cypress cove
Zydeco Jo in the cabin,
Shakin' the floorboards,
Girls yellin'
I like that.

When I was sixteen
I could dance
All night,
Midnight to dawn,
Leavin' straight to my shovel
Spend the whole day
Stakin' plants
My soul weary,
But my body never
Missin' a beat.
But then when
I turned sixteen
I was tired all the time.
When me and my girl
Got together
I like that
Go into the house
Make love
'Til we conk out,
'Til we forget ourselves
Goin' to the cypress cove
Zydeco Jo in the cabin
The floor shakin'
I like that
When the girls
Were yellin'.

I like that, pissin'
In early January
'Gainst a fencepost outside
Like in summer
In the air-conditioning
Soft root
Gumbo in the kitchen
Africa in my hips
Comin' from the other
Side of the world
When the girls were yellin'.

Two hundred year old cypress
Celebratin' my sixteen years
Want to lose my
Virginity tonight
Outside in the dark
Under the porch
When it's nice
Outside in winter
Like in summer
In the air conditioning,
I like that.

Nobodies on the porch
The night studded with stars
When he crashed into me
At sixteen years old
For the first time
It hurt me
But I knew right away
That I liked that.
Smelled the
Blood runnin'
Between my thighs
The cabin jumpin'
The sky spinnin' too fast
Around the North Star
Harder than the root,
Two hundred years old
I like that
I like that.

*27 December 1994, near Henderson,
St. Martin Parish, to Kristi Guillory.*

Since I loved

Tonight the hope of my poetry
 Danced in the kitchen
Like a top, full
 Of voracity and fever
To show me how
 I became old and
Only good for lying down outside
 On bedsprings,
Abandoned only the memory
 Of love made long ago
Going from one side to another,
 Too demanding for these old bones
For the hernia that pierces the
 Intestines of a damned ex-poet
Old wolf who lost his teeth
 Who can't howl anymore
Can only
 Let out sighs
When you've lost your touch,
 When you've had ten years
Of writer's block when there's
 Nothing more to say that's worth
The trouble of saying
 Sitting on the porch with
Empty eyes fixing on
 Every car that goes down the street
Taking people elsewhere,
 Toward stories that I won't know anymore
That I can hardly imagine,
 Life lived through others
Old wolf recalling
 Old battles,
Exaggerating his glory.

When I was young poetry
 Flowed from my pen like
Piss after too much beer,
 In the middle of the night barking
Like a stray dog, breaking
 Windows, annoying the neighbors,
Dancing with Kali close by,
 And I'm not ashamed of my
Comfortable bourgeoisie it's just
 That it stops me from having
Things to say.

Pelican shredding her chest
 To feed her little ones
In long as she can
 Before after during.
Night shattered by trucks
 On the dream road hauling
Illusions from one end of the American
 Continent to the other I see
The black sky with red
 Stars, nothing moving
On the prairie hunter
 Searching for truth

Naked in the kitchen with
 My dick in my hand
Not so near, but rather far,
 Use it or lose it
Power mitigated by
too much time, too much delinquency,
too much masturbation, too many
broken promises, too many deceptions,
too many dead friends, too many drugged
seasons, too much laziness, too much
bitterness, too many abandoned dreams,
too much weakness, too many lies,
too many broken hearts, too much shame
too much politesse, too much distance
between the dancer and the dance
my unprofound trance,
spinning around without getting dizzy
sinning without believing in it
too long since I loved,
too long since I loved.

Migration

Flock of red-winged blackbirds,
 Hundreds if not thousands,
 Coming from the north turned
West-northwest and returned.
 Four beats of the wings, then glide.

The females the color of old bronze,
 The males in brilliant black
Touched with red fire at the shoulder.

Coming by the dozen to knot up
 In multitudes in the heart of the neighboring field,
Cloud of black birds on the edge of the prairie,
 Or lined up like candies
In the branches of the arrow-trees denuded
 By this early winter.

Clear day to watch them
 Mount like Moses's pillar,
 Searching for the promised land,
Always one falling behind.

26 December 1994, at Chênes du Marais.

Burn the cane

Fire burning at the neighbors',
Smell of smoke
Filling this winter twilight.

Prepare the field. Burn the cane.

27 February 1994, at Chênes du Marais.

Once the harvest is brought in, you burn the leftover bits of sugar cane to make fertilizer for the next planting.

Glossary

arrow tree: small wild tree. The American Indians used the branches to make their arrows.

bullfrog: *Rana catesbiana*. A very large frog with mottled skin, with a deep resonating call. (20 cm / 8 in.)

canada goose: *Branta canadensis*. Large migratory goose. (63-108 cm / 25-43 in.)

chicken tree: *Sapium sabiferum*. More commonly called Chinese Tallow Trees. They were imported from China in the 19th century and their fruits were ground for chicken feed.

coon ass: A pejorative name for Louisiana's Cajuns. During World War II, Louisiana French-speakers served as translators between the French and American armies. After hearing the insult "conasse" (idiot, imbecile) they adapted it to their own experience and added the insulting term to the Louisiana lexicon.

egret: *Casmerodius albus*. Large white bird, native to marshes. (95 cm / 37 in.)

kestrel: *Falco sparverius*. Small bird of prey. (23-30 cm / 9-12 in.)

killdeer: *Charadrius vociferus*. A plover, common in farmlands. Its cry is loud and piercing. (23-28 cm / 9-11 in.)

lagniappe: A commercial bonus, common in Louisiana. With a purchase, the merchant gives a little more of whatever was sold. This is "lagniappe."

nightjar: *Chordeiles minor*. Nocturnal bird, known for its acrobatic twilight flights. (24 cm / 10 in.)

parish: Governmental jurisdiction in Louisiana, analogous to counties in the other United States.

red-winged blackbird: *Agelaius phoeniceus*. Small black bird, the males are distinguished by a bright patch, or 'epaulet' on their shoulders.

St. Medard's Day: The feast of St. Medard is June 8th. According to tradition, if it rains on St. Medard's Day, forty days of rain will follow.

tchéroqué: *Rosa laevigata*, Cherokee rose. Wild, thorny white rosebushes. These served as fences for the first farmers in the southwestern prairies of Louisiana.

tchoque: *Euphagus carolinus*, Rusty Blackbird. Always travels in large packs; not known for being particularly intelligent. (20 cm / 8 in.)

Contrary to standard usage, I write Louisiana with two N's (as it was originally spelled), not to honor Anne d'Autriche, the wife of Louis XIV, but simply because I find it prettier that way.

Vita

Mike Bierschenk was born in Nacogdoches, Texas, where he lived throughout his childhood before leaving for the great state of Ohio to pursue a degree in something, he knew not what. After graduating with two Bachelor of Arts degrees in French and Linguistics from The Ohio State University in June of 2004, he returned to the South. After completing his Master of Arts degree at Louisiana State University, he will go on to pursue a Master of Fine Arts degree in the medium of poetry.