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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  
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## **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 Luís 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.

*1<sup>st</sup> 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 22<sup>nd</sup>, 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 12<sup>th</sup> 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 27<sup>th</sup>  
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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 8<sup>th</sup>. 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. There 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.