

MY FRENCH

First published in *Ploughshares*, issue #154, Winter 2022-23

It's a small mark, quick cut, a single stroke. An incident, not the main event, on the page — more flicked than drawn, starting at the top and moving, diagonally, down to the left.

A diacritic. It's a diacritic. I don't want to use the word accent. (That question which plagues me in the francophone world: *D'où vient-il, ce petit accent?* / *Where's it from, your little accent?*)

If the line were to move down to the right instead of the left, the diacritic would be called *grave*, as in, serious. This one is *aigu*, as in, the sharp tip of _____ (say, an arrow); of a sound: piercing, grating, shrill; intense _____ (say, suffering); of an angle: acute; incisive _____ (say, perception). This is the pleasure and the curse of the bilingual mind: you hear every possibility in a word, every meaning. A net of associations you can't shrug off. But *aigu*, when it refers to the diacritic, just means: pronounce it this way.

The sound signaled by *aigu* over e, *é*, doesn't exist in English. An approximation would be to rip apart the diphthong "ay" and throw away the latter half, clipping the vowel before the tongue hits the top of the mouth. That's close, but not quite right.

A capitalized letter (say, for a proper name) effaces the mark. You're just supposed to know it's there, and how to say it. Because my mother was French and my father is American, my brothers and I were given names that could be pronounced with ease in either language. Though most people in my life today know me as Lily, my real name is Elisabeth (*élišabéth*). I've been trying to tell you I've pronounced my own name wrong for most of my life.

Do you change personalities when you change languages? A bilingual American friend of mine loses her particular sense of humor in translation. I'm not talking about linguistic determinism. (The idea that one can't think beyond the structure of a given tongue—how depressing.) Linguistic relativism, then? Not yet—I'm talking about my impatience with this friend, which occurs mostly while we're in Paris. Why are you not you anymore, I snap internally when she speaks French.

But it's true: the register of the voice shifts. You slide up or down an octave. The mouth is held a certain way. Expression, from the Latin *expressio*, “a pressing out.” I think I'm developing two sets of wrinkles, or maybe three: one by the pursed lips of French, another through my nasal American vocabulary, and a third from my face at rest, etched in the place where there is no speech... *D'où vient-il, ce petit accent?* I'm always asked this question the same way—about my *little* accent—and always stunned by the reminder that there's an audible trace of off-ness, however faint. It's a question that tugs at the hole in the center of me, that mother-sized hole from which my being unspools.

My mother died when she was thirty-seven. I was three.

A listless third language: under pressure, expression pressed out ineffably. Artist Indira Allegra, ever attentive to tension, writes of standing, jet-lagged, before a 1924 wall hanging by Gunta Stöltz, feeling it was “drawing something out” of them, and weeping. (The museum guard, they write, pretended not to notice.) It's their entry point to theorizing about the anatomy of textiles, “what the space between the threads can offer us when engaged in the study of cloth grammar.” Weaving is never not binary, but beyond warp and weft, Allegra presents these holes as a third kind of thread. Not empty spaces, but open portals,

passageways for the losses that unspool from both the weaver's body and, in turn, from the viewer's body. Because I am a student of both textiles and texts, I can't help but think of white space and silences, and how this two-way unspooling is not unlike the experience of reading.

I revisited the essay just now, thinking I'd describe its use of the epistolary (*Gunta—we need to talk*, it begins), how we, the readers, become the museum guard, spectators to an intimate exchange. But it's the bit about Allegra being jet-lagged that jumps out, perhaps because the French expression dominates in my head: one is not *lagged* by a *jet*—what an odd formulation—one has, rather, *the displacement of hours*. That sense of being rendered open, of being off-kilter in time, when displaced.

I looked up Stöltz's weaving, too. The MoMA's gallery label describes it (as expected) much more clinically, citing how Stöltz outlines “both the medium's limitations and its possibilities.”

Dear reader, I am writing to you in English. Funny how the preposition *in* suggests that language is a place. When I *in* my girlhood lived briefly *in* Brooklyn, I was effectively adopted by a French-American family. The parents had met during the prelude to my parents' wedding. (She was the maid of honor; he, the best man, though these are English terms—in French they were, simply, the witnesses.) Their dinner conversations, unlike my family's, bounced freely from French to English, and back again. I was equal parts saddened (my father and his new wife spoke only English) and enthralled, left with the overwhelming impression of having watched a tennis match wherein the ball changed colors mid-net. I'm thinking of Leonard Michaels's question: “If meaning can leave English and reappear in

Yiddish, does it have an absolutely necessary relation to either language?” Now I’m thinking of Susan Howe’s: “Do words flee their meanings?”

I’m sure of where, but not by whom, I learned how to draw diacritical marks such as grave and aigu. (Starting at the top and moving, diagonally, down.) I watched the pen’s movement over a sheet of paper on the dining room table—three wide slabs of dark oak underscored by a roller system, which doubles the table’s surface by leaving gaps for two extensions—but I can’t tell you whose hand was holding the pen. Surely one of my grandparents, the last of the Victorians, since said table is in their house of pale bricks. This recollection is all *where*, no *who*. I’m troubled by my sieve of memory. (*Gunta, your grief makes you porous.*)

I learned, slowly and sure I would be found out, to memorize what letters received which accents. I had no sense of what linked marks to sounds. When I saw my mother tongue written—a rare occasion: my French was oral—it appeared to me as a field of such complex texture I would shudder, and turn away.

I’ve heard weaving called the “mother” of all arts. The luminary Anni Albers, a contemporary of Gunta Stöltz, draws a parallel to architecture: “Both construct a whole from separate parts that retain their identity... Both are ancient crafts... In the early stages they had in common the purpose of providing shelter.”

Cloth, “the body’s first architecture,” protects and declares us. Weaving, that ancient technique, is a logical process of making: one must learn the grammar of the loom as one might learn to speak a language or play an instrument. The loom as a metaphor: a machine of the human mind or, as Roland Barthes called it, “a maquette of reasoning.” From the most

rudimentary frame to the automated Jacquard with its impressive thundering, the loom always provides tension. It is not a blank canvas. It imprints itself upon the process. You have to work within the limitations of the loom.

I'm reminded of a printmaker I knew who would repeat, "The artist breathes in a grid." Whether the medium is language or fiber, with limitation comes possibility. Poet Adrienne Rich drew on the metaphorical resonance of textiles to describe how formalism was part of her strategy: "like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle material I couldn't pick up bare-handed."

Around the age of twenty, I developed a disconcerting fixation on the figure of Caliban. Unable to pin down why I found him so haunting, I stalked collegiate lawns with his words ringing in my mind: *Be not afraid. The isle is full of noises...* This obsession coincided with another: I was taking a class devoted to the sonnet, wherein I acquired the highly marketable skill of spotting one from a mile away. What it is about the form, even in its free-wheeling versions, that makes it immediately recognizable? The sonnet isn't just a poetic form; it's *the* poetic form, "an incubator for individuality," its invention often pointed to as the beginning of modern poetry. Though contemporary poets will often eschew the rhyme scheme or even—despite a Pythagorean harmony to the 8:6 relation—the telling 14 lines, no sonnet is a sonnet without the form's characteristic turn, the volta, which "mimics the mind in argument with itself."

In this way, it is "a lyric sung by the soul to the soul." It has also been called "a moment's monument" and "an echo chamber," wherein one's voice resonates with those of all poets who have engaged with the form since it first appeared in Sicily some 750 years ago,

under the influence of Arabic poetry. “*Part prison / part panic closet, a little room in a house set aflame.*” That’s Terrance Hayes, complicating, or correcting, from his vantage point as a black man in America, John Donne’s “*We’ll build in sonnets pretty rooms.*”

All poetry, but especially the sonnet, has this quality of collapsing time into space. And the sonnet, in particular, begs to be sequenced; these are rooms that suggest hallways. A sonnet cycle linked by repeating first and last lines, often addressed to a specific person around a single theme, is called a corona: a crown.

(We’ll circle back to Caliban, I promise.)

“The world is designed for the right-handed,” Grand-mère said, hovering over the oak table, taking the pencil from my left hand to place it in my right. I was four, maybe five years old. My brothers and I would spend our summers in France where our grandparents’ task was twofold: to keep our mother’s memory alive and to teach us what it meant to be French. It was an education continually stitched in one season and unstitched by our return to the States. Take table manners. In France, we learned, it is considered improper to cut one’s lettuce (one must expertly wield one’s fork and knife as folding devices instead); the bread is to be placed next to, never upon, the plate; when not eating, one’s hands must rest on the table, never in one’s lap. Naturally, American decorum reverses all of this (except, perhaps, the rule concerning lettuce).

It’s as if the languages, too, were designed in direct opposition. Not only are French and English sounds in rambunctious disharmony, littered with vowels the other can’t pronounce, they’re also rife with false cognates: trickster words that look similar but mean something different. The English adjective tentative is a French noun, an attempt. To bless is

to consecrate, but *blesser* is to wound. If you sit on someone's *chair* in French, you're sitting on their flesh. You may not want preservatives in your food, but you most certainly do not want any *préservatifs*—you'd be chewing on condoms. Shall I resume my line of thought or *résumer*, sum it up? I suppose none of this would be shocking if it weren't for the fact that French is a Romance language with Germanic influences, and English a Germanic language with Latin influences; you'd expect them to sit a little more comfortably beside one another.

Instead, in my head, they're constantly bickering. The tremendous effort it takes to inhabit the space between the two. Unbridgeable gap. A state of perpetual reaching, always aware of what can't be said, always searching for another mode of expression, a single, sufficient utterance.

We follow the thread of a thought; one who assembles fabulous tales is a spinner of yarns... "but the true storyteller, the poet, is a weaver." Text, from the Latin *texere*, to weave. It's a connection found across cultures, and not just the Western, and not just the written word. In creation myths of the Dogon people of Mali, the ancestral genitor Nommo taught humans speech by weaving a white cloth out of his mouth, with his tongue between his teeth. The Dogon word for cloth *soy*, or *so y*, means, "it is the word." The tactility of Andean quipus, their knots encoding messages. Another kind of language: "something that can be felt, something that can be touched, and something that can be handled."

At the time of writing this essay, I have received *une nouvelle*, some news (a homonym in French for novella), which has had the effect of feeling not the rug so much as the floorboards ripped out from under me.

“I have news,” I tell first my brother, then my father.

“You’re pregnant,” they both venture, despite the fact that I am actively, visibly smoking a cigarette while speaking to them. In fairness, it’s a prop so habitual in my hand one might note only its absence. The news is not that I’m pregnant. (The news is not relevant.) But if I were to become a mother, could I speak to my child in French? Would I—wouldn’t I—pass on this off-kilter state, speaking one’s mother tongue with a limp? The agony of articles! Reader, why would I inflict this upon another?

I’m not trying to become a mother, not now. Right now, I’m in graduate school, where every time a French writer is cited, the class turns (metaphorically) towards me. (We’re on Zoom.) Sometimes I get issued a direct apology: “Sorry I’m butchering your language.”

“It’s okay,” I deflect, “I don’t have the Académie Française on speed dial.” What I don’t say: if you only knew how much butchering I do.

“You must correct her,” Grand-mère said, leaning in towards my husband with whom, after years of speaking exclusively in French, I now talk in a fluid and, to any monologist, nonsensical blend of Franglish. I had likely just misgendered an object. It’s a mistake no native speaker would ever make, and which I do constantly. Honestly, though, what about the table makes it masculine?

(Nothing does. Table is feminine in French. I have only just now noticed this mistake.)

Apart from my childhood summers, I spent a total of five years in the francophone world: two in Paris, fresh out of undergrad with a degree in poetry that seemed to baffle everyone I met (“but what will you do with *that*?”), followed by three in rural Cameroon, where no one asked about my studies. I was twenty-five years old when I followed my partner there. If it pained

me to leave Paris, it was only because I felt I'd failed in some way — my mother had lived there, my mother (I'd been told) had loved living there, but I never found my place. In Paris, my accent and linguistic missteps betrayed me: I could never be French. It was easy to leave.

He worked in a factory that produced canned green beans. Though we weren't married at the time, I stepped into the role of the ex-pat wife, promptly threw the rulebook out the window, taught English at a women's center, and apprenticed to a tailor, who set in motion this wild fascination with fibers. My partner and I lived in the Grassfields among the Bamiléké, one of the ethnic groups that spearheaded the resistance movement before, and after, Cameroon gained independence. In Cameroon — a country colonized first by the Germans, then the British and the French — the countries we came from were of secondary importance: we were, first and foremost, white. By that fact, certain members of the older generation held us in uncomfortably high esteem, and much of the younger population regarded us with suspicion, or outright hostility. Nearly every person we knew in Bandjoun was bilingual, speaking their mother tongue, a dialect of the language group Ghomala', as well as French. But the French spoken there was unlike the French I'd known. I adjusted to Cameroonian speech: not only fresh formulations — *qu'est-ce que tu veux dire / what do you mean by that* became *tu dis que quoi / you say that what* — but a new cadence, an entirely different inflection. The stringent regulations, laws of grammar that caused me such anguish, shifted in this space. The system expanded. My ears adapted. I learned, by unlearning, to speak my own French.

When I returned stateside after the summer Grand-mère had “corrected” my ambidexterity, my father was furious. Should I mention he's left-handed? But there was nothing moral, no

nineteenth-century idea of the devil, in Grand-mère's dissuasion. It was a matter of practicality. *The world is designed for the right-handed*. Scissors, for instance. The spirals on notebooks. Grand-mère, a deeply practical woman, who wastes nothing, whose years have been rhythmized by her tireless task of tracking the material world. A joke repeated in my family: she keeps a box labelled *des petits bouts de ficelle qui ne serviront à rien / useless bits of thread that will surely serve no purpose*. Among the things she saved: scraps of my mother's life, things of such obvious insignificance no other person would think to hold onto them, but she did, and she gave them to me, and I cherished them.

When I learned to weave, I fell in love with the gesture. The boat shuttle passed from hand to hand without hierarchy, a bodily side-to-side movement, building up a plane of fabric.

Anni Albers explored woven forms as "vehicles for abstract thought," inspired, on the one hand, by Andean fibers as a means of communication in the absence of written language and, on the other, by calligraphic forms of writing. ("The word and the picture are one," her teacher, Paul Klee, famously said.) I'm sitting at my desk, with a book about her splayed in my lap, and I'm also standing on the second floor of a dimly lit museum in western Cameroon. There's an indigo resist-dyed fabric particular to the region; I knew it was called Ndop and that it was reserved for ritual use; I'd encountered similar motifs painted in blue on the outer walls of chiefdoms. The patterns seemed to me both unruly and codified, random and precise, and until I saw them broken down on the walls of the gallery, I didn't understand I'd been wrong to think of them as decorative: Ndop's geometric forms contain the whole of Bamiléké cosmology.

In November of 2016, nine months after I moved to Cameroon, a series of protests erupted in the anglophone region two hours north of where I lived. Teachers and lawyers unions led the first demonstrations against centralization and francophone domination; the government's brutal crackdown fueled a violent resistance, which escalated into an armed conflict that has seen, to date, half a million people displaced. I watched, horrified, from the relative security of a francophone region, the country's slow descent into civil war. The fact that it was occurring along the fault line of languages did not escape my notice.

To be clear, it was never a question of linguistic difference. It was about the imposed systems (civil vs. common law, education) that the francophone and anglophone colonizers brought with them. It was about all the structures that surround language. I shouldn't be using the past tense. The war hasn't ended.

He's been here, all along, in my writing, though I've hardly mentioned him. Caliban! Whose mother looms large, though absent. His solitude, his fraught relationship with language. It's an uncomfortable identification; I feel queasy probing into it, but not as dishonest as I do, trying to ignore it.

In her cycle of free-wheeling sonnets, Talvikki Ansel places Caliban in Elizabethan England—Shakespeare's world through Shakespeare's form. It's how she brings this solitary figure into the physical place of his master, in such an evocative formal reversal, how she has us learn language *with* Caliban, how we *become* him in the reading, that—that—

"Afterwards: Caliban" has haunted me, but I can't tell you how it works, nor what it's working towards. All I can say is how Ansel's Caliban embodies, to me, the loneliness of being only one person, and having to, despite how all expression is riddled with holes, find one's

particular speech. (*Outlining the medium's limitations and its possibilities.*) I didn't have this vocabulary when I first entered these spaces. Back then, I was sitting in a cubicle in the bowels of a library known as "the stacks," claustrophobic little rooms walled in by musty-smelling books, and I reacted by writing not the paper on *The Tempest* I had been assigned, but a pamphlet, "Caliban's Spelling Book," instead.

Ansel's Caliban quietly, ever so quietly, closes the cycle with the couplet:

What I tell you, what I tell you —

It is so much smaller than what I cannot tell you.

When I'm asked, as I'm often asked, "where's it from, your little accent," I have to swallow my desire to revise the question. It's not a where, it's a when. I was three years old when my mother died, leaving behind three children. I have no memories of her, and my brothers, faint and few ones. Her death entailed the (partially recovered) loss of our first language, the loss of the people we might have been if we had known her, if her life had not been, as it was, shrouded in mystery. How can you mourn someone you never knew, or whom you know only obliquely, through the material traces they left behind in a house, an ordinary house of pale bricks?

How do you mourn someone in the wrong language, when you cannot mourn them in the tongue they would have taught you?

A paradox: I think I'm a writer because the loss of my mother has attuned me to language, has positioned me, off-kilter, in the gaps between speech.

In the space between two tongues, a third: the language of threads.

A few months ago, for my final project in my first weaving class, I translated the architecture of the sonnet to the loom on a triple weave structure. I explained the technical aspects during critique: how I'd equated rhyme scheme with weft color and treadling, gestured to iambic pentameter with shades of warp, and enacted the volta, the turn, with the physical action of a tie-up change. I went on for a bit about the sonnet and worked my way to elegy. *It is the ineffability of this loss*, I said, *that demanded I encode it in cloth*. I had put in fourteen hour days in the studio to finish the project and was slightly bleary-eyed as I continued, *The seams between the sonnets allow the three warps to switch positions. I have chosen dimensionality over legibility*. During the critique, our conversation returned to the ideas of Indira Allegra, how the corona/cloth's inaccessible spaces might be a better mirror to the experience of grief: not a fixed thing, but a flexible, collapsing memorial. It's rare for me to feel satisfied with something I've made, but this—I didn't pick it apart for its imperfections. It felt important. I had made a linked crown of little rooms to hold what my memory couldn't. (*Something that can be touched, something that can be handled*.) That night, I slept for twelve straight hours.

Shortly after, I flew back to France. I visited my grandparents in that house she, too, inhabited. Grand-père handed me a booklet he had prepared with photographs of and texts about my mother and her siblings.

Her section ends:

Ce 25 novembre Sophie était montée dans notre chambre avec pour nous deux tasses de thé, juste avant de partir à son travail, bien avant le lever du jour dans la brume d'automne, et elle a eu ce terrible accident, à midi Elisabeth revenait de l'école avec en ce jour de la Sainte Catherine une couronne pour sa maman.

It's how the French prolongs her living. English cuts it short: *she came to our room*, as opposed to *elle est montée dans notre chambre*, which is closer to *she climbed up to our room*—we get a glimpse of her, briefly, on the staircase, balancing the tray with one hand and steadying herself on the wood railing with the other, the steam rising, aromatic, from the two mugs of tea she is bringing to her parents' bedroom—

I'm afraid it will all be lost in translation, but today, exactly twenty-seven years later, this is the space in which I still find myself: in this passageway between my French and my English.

On that 25th of November, Sophie came to our room bringing for us two cups of tea, just before she left for work, well before the day broke in its autumnal mist, and she had that terrible accident, at noon Elisabeth came home from school with, on that day of the feast of St. Catherine, a crown for her mother.