

For a time, I became obsessed with *trouvères*, those 12th century songsters. Whether we French writers will or no, they're our predecessors, lutes at the ready, throats in voice. Long before the Symbolists took hold with their dense allusiveness and cryptic imagery, verse was closer to the ground. Writers and troubadours said plainly what was on their minds and hearts. I gravitated to them as a parched man kneels before a rivulet. A particular short lyric by Guiot de Provins created the straightforward poetry I needed after my breakup with Giselle.

*Las! toz jors la desir,
Et ades voi ma mort,
Et si ne puis morir.*

*Alas! forever I desire her
And always see my death
And cannot die.*

I ditched Paris and began working in Brussels as a commercial translator, making bankers and diplomats sound as if they had souls. I returned to a passage in George Steiner. *Our own being is modified by each occurrence of comprehensive appropriation. No language imports without risk of being transformed.* That was my challenge—to let words act on me, rather than trying to control them.

You'd think that after ten-hour stretches of business and government translation into and out of French and Italian, I'd want nothing more than a beer and a detective movie. I might have gone out on the boulevard, had I known anyone. But I did not, and the least of my inclinations was to sit at an outdoor table alone, glancing at the fabric of each passing skirt and the legs that carried it past me. So I found myself hunched over my desk in the dubious light, on the border of eyestrain, trying to make sense of Folquet de Marselha.

The more I tried to decipher Provençal, the less I understood.

Be an mort e lor
Mei huel galiador,
Per ques tanh qu'ab else plor,
Pks ylh so an merit,
Que'en tal don'an chausit
Don't han fach fallimen,
E qui n'aut pueia bas deissen!

It was unlikely I would find a Provençal dictionary in a bookstore at that late hour, or any hour. To look online would break the magic spell of my desolation. I wasn't willing to give up loneliness until I knew what would take its place. And for that, only a thumbed-through tome bearing a human touch could suit my soul.

Two displacements allowed me to write. I decided to translate his poem into English, the language of reason—of things making sense—and to use phonetic translation, roughly matching sound for sound, rather than sense for sense.

I would have been dead, my Lord
But the gladiator fled
Because I cried so hard.
Well, I have no merits
Except chasing women.
Don't have faith; I'm fallen.
Yet how beautiful my demerits.

It was all wrong. I'm not good at dying, only pretending to. And *gladiator*; that's too harsh, mere melodrama, certainly not a suitable metaphor for Giselle. Crying, I only do it softly. And I don't chase women. Fallen, yes, as Adam was, I suppose. But really, more than anything, crestfallen. The one true line was the last one. Not sin, not lack, not failure. Simply demerits, as a child gets in grammar school, for putting the verb in the wrong tense. And beautiful ones! I began to laugh at my preposterous translation, which seemed a comedy that Guillaume Apollinaire might have enjoyed, had he smoked some hashish beforehand. I ended up genty mocking myself, a decent poet but the worst of translators. Why couldn't I complete Steiner's hermeneutic motion? Because I didn't want to expose myself to the risk of memory. Yet that was the only way out, sincere remembrance, no tricks.

I went back to Steiner. *The dialect of embodiment entails the possibility that we may be consumed.* That is exactly what I wanted to express—what had happened to me, how I was annulled, such that I ended up in Brussels poring over speeches and contracts like a miserable scrivener. It was simply her I wished to recapture, if only for a moment, and I had to do it as *trouvières* do. I sat and wrote without thinking, without even trying. The words passed through my body, making me whole again.

Her love runs through my heart, its flume
As clear as any mountain stream
Shaking the leaves of the wild rose
While from a branch, a nightingale
Brimms with song, its beak a spout
Pouring its trill into the waters.

Its notes can't be grasped; they flow too fast.
Meadows sigh in their mist, the field a pond
The tree a mast. Her scent refreshes
The forest, its speed heals my wounds
And though she's gone, a liquid wisp
Clings to me, a drop left on my skin.

I paced around the room, rereading, and though I had no lute to accompany my voice, I opened the window and sang to the street below, ebullient, over and over until somebody called up from the sidewalk for me to shut up and get over it.