

Valerie Nieman

Correspondences

We live suspended in a network of analogy, each of us admitted to a lending library of private symbols intersecting with the public, the present with the past. On a train trip from Paris to Nice, my journal became the logbook of an encounter mediated by a particular kind of cultural aphasia, a lack not only of words but also of context. This was a landscape with which I had only a fragmentary connection—the correspondence of what is here/now and seemed like there/then.

A glimpsed village, rubble in its center. A memorial maintained from wartime bombing? Slag from a mine? A ruined castle? Without context this place has not only no name, but no place in mind. Not to know the history, geology, or botany, of a place is to be blind while seeing it. In Paris, I used the lenses of history and literature. There was flesh on the bones, Jeanne d'Arc made real from childhood reading of Twain's biography, the Louvre inhabited by kings and the Bastille still standing in mind, if not in stone. Heading south, a landscape flashed past without connection, without correspondences—the connections on the Metro and RER that move a traveler from one line to the other, as synapses connect this with that. The French landscape became the landscape of Chinese scrolls, mannered and iconic—castle, tower, vineyard. The farmer opening a gate opened a similar gate onto a field outside Randolph, New York...Farmington, West Virginia...Eden, North Carolina.

Landscape Literacy

The train rocks slowly through the edge of the city, train yards, apartment blocks, *banlieue*. We pass through a tunnel—suddenly we are in countryside, flat and green, farms with piles of baled hay, rows of Lombardy poplars. A man and a woman and a red dog walk down a road between crop fields in crayon shades of kelly and spring and grass and a blue-green that is perhaps kale, the plantings divided by rich brown tillage. This is the Ile de France, the homeland at the center of a country as Ile de la Cite is the center of the capital where the Parisii founded their village on the sharp-prowed island in the Seine.

In the fields, steam rises from piles of manure and composting hay. Farmhouses are built of rough brown stone—it might be the same stone that built Paris, only polished and carved.

In a wood of white-barked plane trees, green mistletoe is held aloft in symmetrical balls, like topiary in the bare branches. Kin but not kith, *Viscum album* is shapely where *Phoradendron*, its American cousin, drifts—its raggedness perhaps made worse by our holiday tradition of taking down the kissing herb from the treetops with shotgun blasts.

The cars on a parallel highway are going very slowly—the *Train à Grande Vitesse* has hit its stride at 186 mph. The ride is smooth and quiet, impossible to tell how fast we move except by such referents as trees blurring close to the tracks or another TGV passing in a rocket whoosh.

Towers rise above towns and farther away, the folds of the land offer only towers. Silos? Grain elevators? Water towers? I draw them in my journal. One is a hatted round on stilts, like an old-fashioned wooden water tower. Others are truncated cones, wide ends up.

A tollbooth has familiar red and green lights. Cell towers straddle their smaller kin, irrigation systems spidering across fields.

There is more roll to the land now. Strips of crops and fallow. The familiarity of the land calls out, the shapes and colors. This could be New York State, and those plots of trees in the midst of fields, the sugarbushes where maple trees are reserved like livestock, to be tapped in late winter for syrup. I can define this place only through the vocabulary of the places I've lived: The Allegheny Plateau, dairy cattle and grapes and "lake effect" snows that bury deep; the mining heartland of north-central West Virginia, where towns take coal north; Piedmont, North Carolina, home to tobacco and college basketball.

In the vents along the base of the window, a downy feather rises and settles. It is mottled brown like feathers in an old pillow. It stands upright in the grooves, wobbles back and forth with the train and the airflow. We ride backward, everything unrolling toward Paris.

Now the dirt is black where bare. The landscape changes more intimately than when seen from the air—that view is geometry, rectangles and divergent lines, plane geometry. This is the simpler math of cut wood bundled at the side of the road below and hay bales numbered at the top of a knoll.

A tractor crosses a field; it's John Deere-green familiar. A small silver car proceeds between corduroy fields. Like the farmlands of North Carolina or Ohio—yet stooping to touch the ground here I would find the texture of the earth different, the flecks of stone in loam, the shape of trees and scent of herbage. *Le terroir*, it's called, the soil, but more the particularity of this place, the tang of minerals laid down in the vascular system of crops and cattle.

I wake from a nap to a landscape of hedgerows, with more sun and white cattle. Charolais, I remember, a neighbor's fence-breaking cattle, *Charolais* from the place of their breeding. Square houses are brown with red tile roofs. Vineyards are squares with staked lines all up the green hills, with cows and sheep below. Now it is French. The soil is stonier here, stones under the hedgerows.

We move very fast between steeper hills. A farmstead has a bright fire burning at the edge of the road. They would call that "burning off the filth" back in West Virginia, another place of stony hills and twisting streams. *Cave cooperative* on the side of a square yellow building. Warehouses and a steel-and-glass office building seem out of place, but there they are, and suburbs and a superhighway and an inflated Santa on a roof. A broad river with an eyot. A tree plantation and then a motocross park. Swiftly here and then gone.

An old woman in a beige suit with a gold brooch on her lapel reads every word of *Le Figaro*. She sees nothing beyond the newspaper. The landscape is as familiar to her as the unseen verges of the Long Island Railroad are to New York commuters.

The Shape of Language

Jack is going to Car #4 for wine. "How do you say it?" he asks.

"Côtes de Rhone," I answer, thinking of last night's table.

"No, with an S." The wine he'd brought back earlier was a syrah.

"Shee-rah," I say.

"Like Wally Schirra?"

I have to think for a moment. Schirra, yes, the astronaut, the moon, a spike of fire blurred on the television screen.

"That's how I'll remember it."

Language carries our mothers' genes like the mitochondria that link us back to putative Eve. Our mouths are not shaped to any particular tongue, but our mothers help fit our lips and palates to the words we will use. Later we will be unable to make the clicks of Xhosa or a palate-touching "L."

Memory and longing sit in the mind the way words sit in the mouth, waiting to be formed. The synapses are already connected, this place, that light, this tug of sadness. The mind is trained by environment as the eye is trained—a man born blind cannot interpret the looming shapes and detonations of color when his sight is surgically restored. He has to be taught: This is a tree; that is a cow. For the rest of us, certain shapes and colors are charged with expectation.

One day not long after I moved from West Virginia to North Carolina, I glanced down a dirt road and saw how water sat in a crescent of the road curving deeper into the trees. My breath stopped and so did I, not sure where I was. This is *le terroir* of our being. Whatever I remembered had happened so long ago that it had lost all names and associations, leaving only emotion twined in my flesh.

Here, I tag memories onto places that did not make them, guided by analogy—the likening of familiar to unfamiliar—as traditional medicine, where a plant lobed like the lungs was believed to be a sovereign remedy for pneumonia. Is there an essential likeness between this square tower with clock faces on its sides and the town halls and schools of my youth? Is it of necessity, the *mairie*, or do I only presuppose?

Now, a field of white tents, their peaks steeply pointed, pavilions that might house knights-errant or the salesmen at a trade fair. 11:15 a.m. "Department de Rhone" is spelled out in blue and gold on a highway sign. The mountains

multiply on the right, three-deep, slate-blue under a slate sky. Snow on the mountains, more steep white peaks. Like and like. Somewhere south and east, the Alps.

We discuss homelands. I assert that I am French in spirit, though mostly German by blood. Jack says all his people were English by heritage, but he feels German. He makes jokes about a fatherland that is not his and not mine, about the Frenchman in the woodpile who planted Gallic nostalgia in my soul.

Spires of Lombardy poplar, pine, craggy hills and flat fields below. A graceful old church with its spire aimed heavenward. A rough, stony creek, then a startling celadon river. Acres of vineyards and orchards. In one, each small tree is encircled by teal-blue plastic.

Tunnels provide magic-lantern flashes of landscape. Ruins perched on a hill above a prosperous village that no longer needs a minor lord to have and hold it. The rock-lined ditches and berms of a reclaimed open-pit mine I recognize immediately, but the woman across the aisle might instead see ancient breastworks and grassed-over fortifications of war.

Industrial-scale vineyards cover the low rocky hills, with cars parked along their borders. It's December—are they pruning now? Tying up the vines so that the next year's fruit will grow clean and full? Do their hands make the same motions as the women's working the Concord grape vineyards of western New York? That was a tradition, an extra bit of money for the Italian grandmothers from the city and the farm women from the dairies, carrying pruners and wire in the pockets of bibbed aprons retired from Easter dinner service.

A mother behind us coos to her child, repeating syllables, teaching a language. This is the way the mouth forms French—the lips and mouth are forward, reaching toward the roundness of the word.

We glide past a rock wall, a great river—a surprise, a cleft that opens on towers, forts or churches, green fields, then the rock interposes again. I draw a mountain, a wide-angled triangle with snow on the north side. The nearer hills are like rubble, heaps of rock, dull white, weathered, knobby with green in the crevices.

We arrive at a city on a river—that same river?—with the old town in the distance. We pause in what looks like an airport parking lot, with squares of cars divided by plantings. Avignon. The bridge, the popes, ochre buildings, a fragment of what might be. Bars on the outside of the wooden platform let us view low buildings and a waterway constrained to a concrete path. It has the feel of a minimum-security prison.

I walk forward. Is that the Mediterranean to the right? Doors open smoothly between cars. One is the *Voiture de Silence*, the sign a periwinkle-colored circle behind the sleeping face of a cell phone, the antenna like one cocked ear, two arcs for eyes, a round mouth. Where phones are allowed, there is a yellow sign for awake.

I wait in line in Le Bar for the ubiquitous *jambon et emmental* on a long roll called a *campagnard*. The kitchen also offers small dishes of *cassoulet* to be heated in the microwave, a dessert which might be *gateaux* or a Hershey's bar. The man in the dining car speaks excellent English. All the magazine covers offer either a pretty girl or Saddam Hussein.

Marseille looks congested and worn, but what city does not from the train tracks? We ride for a long time through a city between rocky hills before a tunnel debouches into a farming vale, greenhouses with torn plastic showing rows of shrubs. Beyond the trees, the Mediterranean is blue but not sparkling under a gray sky.

Villas with lawns, pines, and the sea beyond. The train has been slowing. We leave behind the harbor with its derricks, now passing a bay with yachts, the houses pink and yellow and cream with tile roofs, little gardens and vineyards and, for the first time, palms.

Water puddles on sand lots.

The train moves without the hum of speed. We roll at a sedate pace past three white horses in a field—a riding school with fences. Everything jumbles from this perspective: a huge concrete plant and behind it an elegant church. A golf course, alien here. Now apartments, now townhouses, now the land of hotels, a junkyard, a city of shutters on tall buildings.

The old lady takes out her cell phone with a rip of Velcro. Further forward, another woman speaks in that long-distance voice. So we announce our arrivals. There is no longer the frisson of wonder as passengers descend: Will he be there, did she make the train?

A house with olive trees. This area is pastorally scruffy, as working farms will be, not the garden villas of the rich, manicured by other people's hands. Folks potter behind their hedges and bamboo screens. Their little plots are colorful with the foxy brown of grape leaves, distinctive gray-green of olives, and soil red as Piedmont clay.

The feather breaks loose from the window vent, floats up, down, rests on the red arm of Jack's sweater. He is asleep, gently snoring, as we glide through a great valley of vines.

A railroad yard has a round tower, like a silo, like a fairytale prison, like an old shot tower where hot lead fell into the form of pellets. Magical, places of secrecy and alchemical change.

The soil is ever more red, a great plain of red soil, mountains eroding down to the plain, to the vines to color the skins of the grapes.

Houses struggle out of a clutter of cars and furniture and appliances and junk. "Are we there yet?" Jack asks groggily, and for a moment I couldn't say where "there" might be. A flock of sheep, dirty brown, and a field of pens, a chicken and its house in each one. A yard full of tires, another full of stored building materials. Peasants are everywhere, provide, provide.

Finding the Words: Return

The woman in the seat one forward and across appears to be in her 80s. She dresses as the French do for traveling, the way Americans might for a business meeting or a wedding. A beige shawl crosses a white blouse. She wears a string of amber beads and a wristwatch over the cuff of her blouse. Olive slacks. Neat hair, medium length, a soft ash brown, dyed or not.

She has a letter. A note, really, written on the back of an envelope. The hand is large and precise but feminine; the bold signature, however, appears to be "Charles." There is no salutation. She looks at the letter often, more than she does the diamond cluster ring on her right hand or the huge opal on the left, where a wedding ring might be. Finally, she tucks the letter into her book of crossword puzzles, rises and walks to the restroom.

We are returning to Paris. From the Côte d'Azur we passed into the great plains; across the rivers, the mountains to our left are spectacularly frosted, and then the snow come closer, the fields of the piedmont turned white. The pines are perfectly flocked, the air full of snow and the countryside gray, all perspective flattened. The mountains are gone, our world contained to the villages and the fields closes to the tracks. In this cocoon, quietly rocking, I nod off.

When I wake the woman is reading pages torn from *Classica Magazine*.

Beyond the windows, the French countryside unrolls like the slow pan of a camera across a beloved landscape. The speed of the TGV heightens reality while somehow removing it. The sky has cleared and the only snow to be seen is higher up on the hills. There has been rain, or snow has melted—the many small streams run full and water stands in the fields among the horses, sheep, cows, hedgerows. This is a rounded land, the mountains pushed back.

The woman unwraps foil, tidily, folding it back around the lunch she brought from home somewhere in the south.

The snow has mixed with rain. A couple of thin beads of water make their way back along the windows, pressed close by our speed.

The fields of blue-green kale melt into villages, industry, apartment blocks. We are approaching Paris.

She takes out the envelope, lays it across the magazine article, takes out stationery and begins to write. It appears she is recopying the message from the back of the envelope. Her hand moves decisively, the watch glinting as her wrist shifts with each stroke.

The tracks multiply. Soon we will be at the Gare de Lyon, and it is Christmastime, there will be a press of people, there will be the harp-chord before an announcement, three notes rising and then a stroked combination like pigeons ascending into cast-iron rafters, the pulse of electricity, the lights, the cold that presses travelers into the benches.

Whatever the words, she has found them.

Valerie Nieman is the author of a collection of short stories, *Fidelities*, from West Virginia University Press, featuring stories that first appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *Arts & Letters*, *West Branch*, and other journals and anthologies. Her most recent short fiction publication came in an “American Apocalypse” issue of *Green Mountains Review*. Her first novel, *Neena Gathering*, was a science fiction paperback later translated for the Brazilian market. Her second novel, *Survivors*, was a story of family dysfunction in a Rust Belt town in the 1970s, and *Feral*, a novel set in North Carolina, will be published in 2010.

A poetry collection, *Wake Wake Wake*, was published in 2006 by Press 53, including work published in two chapbooks, and in *Blackbird*, *Poetry*, *New Letters*, *REDiViDER*, and in numerous anthologies. A former newspaper reporter and editor, she continues to freelance articles on travel and sailing. She has received an NEA creative writing fellowship, two Elizabeth Simpson Smith prizes in fiction, and the Greg Grummer Prize in poetry. A graduate of the MFA program at Queens University of Charlotte, she teaches writing at N.C. A&T State University.

“I moved recently, and while packing, found a photograph of the house where I grew up in western New York State. It’s a winter shot, in black and white. Snow is blowing across the gray face of the house and the dark rectangle of the front porch with my father’s homemade Christmas star hanging in the middle. I don’t remember the porch in winter, although I must have stood there to watch for the school bus. The memory, despite this photo, is always of spring, and the forsythia blossoms fountaining up from the big old bushes at the end.”