La cigale change la nuit/The Katydid Sings at Night

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Ashlee Sanders has completed her senior project, "La Cigale chante la nuit"/"The Katydid Sings at Night" in a satisfactory manner.

The project was defended on April 26, 1999 and met the approval of the project committee, consisting of Dr. Karen Levy, Dr. Peggy Beauvois, and Dr. Jack Reese.

\[\text{Signature}\]
student, Ashlee Sanders

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mentor, Dr. Karen Levy
la cigale chante
la nuit !

the katydid
sings at night!

Ashlee Sanders
le 19 avril, 1999
Introduction

The year from August 1997 to August 1998 was a very significant one in the life of one family and in the lives of an odd collection of students from around the world who were studying in Rennes, France during that year. As I partake of both groups, it was particularly so for me. It was a time in which change, constancy, friendship, loneliness, home, and foreignness all took on new meanings. Loss and discovery, English and French, childishness and growth coexisted almost daily. The story of what happened in the lives of the family, as well as in the lives of the students, and of what it all meant to one student and family member, is written down here. It is intermingled, as it was lived.
Advent

We have tested and tasted too much, lover --
through a chink too wide comes in no wonder.
But here, in the Advent-darkened room
where the dry black bread of penance will charm back the luxury
of a child's soul, we'll return to Doom
the knowledge we stole but could not use.

And the newness that was in every stale thing
when we looked on it as children: the spirit-shocking
Wonder in a black slanting Ulster hill
or the prophetic astonishment in the tedious talking
of an old fool, will awake for us and bring
you and me to the yard gate to watch the wins
and the bog-holes, cart-trucks, old stables
where time begins.

O after Christmas we'll have no need to go searching
for the difference that sets an old phrase burning.
We'll hear it in the whispered argument of a churning
or in the streets where village boys are lurching.
And we'll hear it among decent men, too
who burrow dung in gardens under trees --
where-ever life pours ordinary plenty.

Won't we be rich, my love and I, and
please God, we shall not ask for reason's payment --
the Why of heart-breaking strangeness in dreeping hedges,
oranalyse God's breath in common statement.
We have thrown into the dust-bin the clay-minted wages
of pleasure, knowledge, and the conscious hour --
And Christ comes with a January flower.

Patrick Kavanagh
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Puis, après une certaine période de temps,
le soleil s'adoucit.
Et tout renait avec le crépuscule.
La douceur du soir incite des enfants à se mettre à vélo,
des parents à la terrasse.

Lorsque la nuit enveloppe le soir
et les étoiles font leur apparence,
on goute enfin la délicate fraîcheur unique à une nuit d'été, un cadeau qui transcende

soulagement,
et qui benit tout de sa nouveauté.

C'est là, dans ces moments de baptême, ou se produit le concert nocturne des bois.
Il commence tout doux,
et puis grandit,
redouble,
et domine.

Oui,
la cigale chante la nuit.
Then, after a time,
the sun relents.
And all is reborn with the advent of dusk.
The gentle evening invites children to their bikes,
parents to the back porch.

When the night envelops the evening
and the stars make their appearance,
one tastes, at last, the delicate cool unique to a summer night, a gift which transcends
relief,
and blesses all in newness.

It is there, in those baptismal moments, when there begins the nightly concert of the
woods.
It starts out softly,
and then grows,
redoubles,
and dominates.

Yes,
the katydid sings at night.
aggravating Granddaddy with its endless annual shedding, the sun deliciously warm, and the muscadines ripe. Traci and I would often wander down to the garden, and pick and eat and gossip and eat a little more and come back with just enough for a few jars of muscadine jelly. Those Sundays were wonderful because the start of school would be several weeks' past, enough to get over the loss of summer and get school underway, so that the day could be relished guilt-free.

This year was different. Far from having already accomplished something, the biggest challenge of my twenty-one years lay before me. The anxious anticipation of my great adventure was plenty to lend the day a healthy dose of agitation and poignancy. However, there was something else weighing in the air -- my grandfather's health. In recent months, he had been declining in his understanding of what was going on around him. A few minutes' conversation with him would appear perfectly normal, but when someone got out of his sight, he became confused about the person's identity, sometimes perceiving there to be more people around than there actually were. His grasp on reality thinned with imperceptible slowness, like whiskey being watered down one drop at a time. Who can say whether the significance of the situation was lost on us, or whether we simply didn't talk about it? We are not a family to dwell on misfortunes.

That afternoon, after we had finished off the fried chicken, I put a deviled egg in a paper towel and went out to the porch to see Granddaddy. I sat down in the rocking chair next to him, and for a minute or two, we sat in contented quiet, listening to the sounds of rocking wood on concrete and the dull buzz of sleepy insects in the grass, contemplating the old school bus garage where Granddaddy had worked for many years. The thing about sitting on the porch with someone is that you are together and alone at once. One never feels pressured to say something to fill a void. After all, you don't look at one another on the porch; you fix your gaze on the "mountains" on the
watching Granddaddy make his way to the barn, tool box in hand, whistling "Curly Headed Baby", Granddaddy spitting tobacco into a Styrofoam cup, watching his Yankees win another game. What if it all slipped through time and through my fingers and out of my grasp while I wasn't even here? What if all I got was a phone call and the impossible choice of whether to return right away and give up the trip home for Christmas, or not be here at all? What if I came back and things were never the same again?

These questions burned in my mind those last few days in Tennessee, creating a puzzle that would not be solved. It seemed that stepping onto the plane was like playing Russian roulette with all that had been comfort to me. I'm not sure why I felt this, really. It's not as though my presence or absence would change anything.

Decatur had always had this intangible capacity to freeze time. The changeless conventions of Sunday afternoons were only reinforced with the passing years. "Changes" were the shift from cornbread to rolls, grand kids getting braces and then getting them off, and the varying opinions on the relative usefulness or good-for-nothingness of Lamar Alexander. The trials and tribulations of adolescence faded into oblivion when the sun-soaked concrete of the porch warmed my bare legs and feet. Each time I tasted the ever-surprising tartness of a lemon meringue pie, all was right with the world.

But neither Decatur nor anything else froze time that August. Far from frozen, time was charging ahead without even slowing down to see who was coming.

On Labor Day, we met my fellow UT France-bound companions and their families at the airport, and the others and I boarded a Northwestern jet headed for Memphis, to make our connection to Amsterdam, and then to Paris. The sky glowed
Thirty-six hours, four airports, and forty-five flights of stairs in the metro later, we arrived at the Caen train station, dragging suitcases and feet, and were met by the chill of autumn in Normandy. It was the late on the night after we had left Knoxville. It was a blessing to find Frederique Vallet, whom I had not seen in over a year, there to meet us and take us back to her home for a meal that I'm sure must have been delicious, but for which we could barely hold our eyes open. After her sons rescued our exhausted limbs by helping us get bags into our rooms, we slept at last. At 9 am the following morning, we had our placement exams for the language classes in Caen, and Part I of the journey had begun.
reverted to middle school, class lines drawn just as clearly by our abilities in French, as
they once had been by that elusive quality that makes a twelve-year-old popular.

With speaking ability came an accompanying obsession, although less easy to
define. It was the manner in which people encountered the new situations which met us
daily and would for the months to come. It was independence, eagerness to launch into
the unknown, even pleasure at being away for such a long time. This, too, became part
of the all-encompassing hierarchy, with those who would rather hitchhike barefoot
through rural Czechoslovakia than return to North America any time soon miraculously
winding up on top of the ISEP food chain.

I would like to be able to say that I rejected this hierarchy as much as this
account would imply. However, as much as I resented the superiority feigned by the
hitchhiking crowd, I cannot say that I was overly admiring of those who seemed to
already be counting the days until they went home. So, somewhere in the middle of the
"tentatively adventurous" category of the ISEP world, I whittled away at my French
grammar, drank cider, and became increasingly impatient to get the show on the road.

After about a week and a half, good will and action miraculously conquered
French beauracracy, and temporary e-mail accounts were set up for each of us. Cost­
free access to the outside world was now within reach. I never actually spoke to the
man who ran the computer lab, but he knew who I was within the first days of e-mail
access. He always nodded as I came in, a semi-friendly beacon to the entrance of the
cramped and often overly warm computer room.

And there, often foregoing meals or sleep to get and keep a computer, I typed out
the ups and downs of my days, rendered two-dimensional flashing green-lettered copies
of my thoughts, and with the push of the "send" key, released excerpts from my heart
into cyberspace. Likewise, every morning, I eagerly awaited the slices of Tennessee life
that had been chosen to be shared with me. Mom wrote to me in mid-September, after
books and clothes for high school with the County Fair prize money that she won thanks to Mrs. Robinson's expert coaching in the fine art of canning, and later, Mrs. Robinson had helped my aunt Bobbie through every stage of her wedding, from invitations to flowers and cake.

As I left the computer room, I was almost startled to find myself once again in Normandy, wondered if I would feel that same way when I returned to Tennessee. Would Rennes eventually become "reality" to me and, at least for a while, make all other things seem strange? Would it flash in and out of my consciousness like a dream? As I walked, I looked down at the pale grass, aware that the ground beneath my feet could be anywhere. I imagined the accordion playing at Walnut Grove Church and thought of the old punch bowl they would undoubtedly use, that my grandparents had given the Robinsons in 1955, increasing the status of both families in the Decatur community by making them, respectively, the owners of a punch bowl and those who had the good taste to give one.

I looked around the wide open spaces between the university buildings, which, we had been told, made it an "American-style" campus. It was strange the way all the students seemed to disappear after five or so in the afternoon and stranger still to realize that UT had already been in session nearly a month. I thought of Granddaddy asking to go home, and then not knowing it when he got there. I pulled my jacket around me as the wind picked up.
ce que c'était exactement l'andouille,
à quelle heure le soleil se couchait,
et à quelle heure s'ouvrait le château le matin.

Il y avait une lumière translucide qui rayonnait à travers les vitres de la Cathédrale St Maurice,
lumière en train de disparaître, le soir, sur les bateaux de pêche délabrés à côté du fleuve,
lumière artificielle des phares qui nous guidait jusqu'à Chartres la dernière nuit.

Cette nuit-là nous prîmes des gâteaux secs et des chocolats pour le dîner,
grace à une petite station de service à côté de l'autoroute.

nous écoutâmes des cassettes;
nous devorâmes des kilomètres.

La silence envahit la nuit.
On commençait de comprendre que nous étions, en tout sens, des pèlerins --
pèlerins du 20e, plus proches à ceux du 13e qu'aux voitures anonymes qui nous passaient à l'occasion.

Puis la route commença de monter, et au sommet de la colline,
le but de notre pèlerinage apparut comme une nouvelle étoile --
aussi étonnante à nous qu'elle dut être à tous nos prédécesseurs.

La cathédrale était l'horizon.

Nous y arrivâmes juste avant la fermeture du bar en face,
five days

between the beginning and the pre-beginning
between the two worlds of bus schedules and dormitories
between the two Orders
there was a space
of five days
where we took to the road.

five days from Angers to Chartres
among three Americans, friends of circumstance,
ready to discover this mysterious France

We left Caen at dawn --
cameras ready to capture everything on film,
the Michelin map and the stuffed rabbit
on the dashboard for navigational purposes.
And this car -- one could just as easily call her liberty --
brought us to Domfront, to Chinon,
all of the places forbidden to the train traveler.

We learned how things worked.
One had to know how much a set of sheets cost for one night at a youth hostel,
how far it was from Saumur to Chinon,
just exactly what andouille was,
The next day we dispersed --
him to Germany,
her to Tennessee,
and me, at last, to Rennes.
room key. Now the only remaining obstacle between me and lasting respite in my very own room was the suitcase trek up two flights of stairs. The thud-thud of suitcase wheels being painstakingly dragged up stairs, one step at a time, had become quite the familiar sounds to me by then, as I had already made several passes through Paris and its Metro system, the escalators of which are there chiefly for decoration. On the way up the stairs, I passed two students, a young man and a young woman, who I naturally assumed were French, since, being in France, I took every individual I encountered as being French. They asked me (in French) if I needed any help. I thought: pay you $100 to get this suitcase to my room, I thought. Non, pas de problème, came my reply.

-- Tu es sûre?
--Oui, oui.

And with that answer, they were satisfied and went on their way. Though I would not know it for several weeks, I had just met the other two Anglophones on my floor, later to become my best friends in Rennes. For the moment, however, they remained part of an anonymous sea of French, to be figured out and dealt with as skillfully as possible. Thus, I was glad to get to the top of the stairs, successfully unlock my door, and sit down on my new bed. I had arrived.
You want to be perceived as "normal". It's such a simple kind of need.
The priest at St. Marc's who had invited me to communion spoke to me again after the
service, at which time I asked if he knew of any gathering of young people in the
Church in the area. Thus I got the address of the Aumonerie des Étudiants des
Étudiants at rue de la Bascule. There were two priests there, Roland and Bêde, both
originally from Nigeria, who had learned French as a third language, as well as Sister
Marie-Terése, who ministered to the group of 40 or so students. The Aumonerie was a
large building in which 4 students lived and in which we had weekly Wednesday night
gatherings, consisting of a supper, mass, and a discussion afterwards. It quickly
became a haven for me.

Le paix du Christ soit avec vous.
-—Et avec votre esprit.
Levez vos coeurs.
-—Nous les levons à Dieu.

Les mots, prononcés dans un riche accent nigerien, caressent mes oreilles.
Ces mots ne changenent pas d'un continent à l'autre,
des protestants aux catholiques,
de siècle à siècle.

Je connais cette langue
je connais cette église
j'en suis partie.
Nous sommes tous étrangers
et tous chez nous.
l'inutile...?
sans voiture pour vous emmener d'ici là,
maison à laquelle vous inviter,
directions à vous donner,
des coins intéressants à vous faire découvrir...

ayant toujours besoin
d'explication,
de traduction,
de présentation...

je me demande
n'ai-je vraiment rien à vous offrir?
ôù résidente la valeur?

ne suis-je autre qu'américaine, anglophone, étrangère?

peut-être
plus que renseignements, directions, voitures, maisons...
la meilleure chose que vous m'offrez
et que je vous offre

pourrait être
ma dépendance de vous.
the fall of autumn

Life became easier. The Aumonerie was, indeed, a good place to be, and there were many there who, like the priest and the woman at St. Marc's, went out of the way to be kind. Although I was far from being competent in my classes, I became comfortable in them after a few weeks, in the same way that anything becomes comfortable if it is frequently enough repeated. And one thing that Theresa and I had in common was the firm conviction that there was no day so frustrating that it could not be redeemed by a good dinner, always finished off with a Café Liegeois or crème brulée. Indeed, the abundant créperies and pizzerias of Rennes did well that autumn.

I still did not really understand what was expected of me on the academic front. There is a rather important difference between French and American universities, which I did not expect nor really grasp for some time, that while American professors assign specific texts with the aim of discussing those texts in class, French professors assign texts that might be interesting reading and, should you choose to attend their lectures, they lecture in class on related topics that may inform the reading done outside of class. I perpetually felt as though I was supposed to be doing something that I wasn’t, and that I would do it as soon as I figured out what it was. I think that, in my misplaced focus on expecting every class to shed light on a particular reading, I missed the benefit of a great many lectures; this was certainly the case in my literature class. My Vivre en Europe class, however, a survey of five countries in the European Union and their cultures, histories, education systems, and present economic systems, was quite useful stimulating. I never had much intention of sitting the exam for the class, but enjoyed attending nonetheless. The professors were generally natives of the countries in question, and it was most fascinating to, for once, see inter-European cultural exchanges as an observer rather than being, as an American, the subject of such discussions.
increasing frequency. I believe that Mme Doree, far from being irritated that I stayed in the class against her recommendation, was well aware and probably a bit pleased that I was out to prove something. (After all, she was French.)

The other discovery I made in school that fall was that my passion for history came to a screeching halt with 19th century French politics.

Thus the weeks of autumn passed. Lessons were frustrating and lessons were enlightening, trains were caught and trains were missed, but the gallettes and the cider excellent without fail.

Soon enough, it was December and nearly time to go home Christmas. I thought I had conquered the world.
one can choose to go on or not, for which one prepares by leaving the stuff where it was unloaded, putting on one's gearing, and going off, always knowing that it is possible to turn around and go back to base camp at any point. *Encore la naïveté de la petite américaine.*

After walking the thirty minutes or so from our Aumonerie de la Bascule near campus to the Aumonerie downtown (again, a sign), we loaded up into a bus for the most normal part of the trip. We had a beautiful ride out into the country and were blessed by wonderful weather. As Corrine said as we passed farms surrounded by stone walls and children and geese and cows, C'est ça la Bretagne. One field led to another, sometimes even uninterrupted by farmhouses. It was in just such a place that the bus stopped.

We were then divided into teams of six people. Each team had a leader, who had a compass and a map. We were to be at the appointed meeting place in no more than five hours. Yes, that's right -- five hours.

The teams went down a little hillside one at a time, for the beginning of the jaunt. We were to be silent as we walked. At the bottom of the hill, a man dressed in white was standing next to a natural spring, and there was a small wooden cross in the ground next to him. He instructed us to purify ourselves in the water before beginning our journey. I was surprised to see how seriously my French peers took the ritual, in contrast with the jovial way that I imagined young Americans would react to the same situation. We bent down to the spring, one at a time, without speaking a word, and washed our faces and hands in the spring, and then walked up the grassy hill back to the road, where, sufficiently purified, we began our trek.

We were an interesting crew. An effort had been made to mix up people from all three aumoneries of Rennes, so that we would meet new people. Our leader was an athletic young man named Franc from Aumonerie St. Yves. There was a young woman studying medicine, a middle-aged priest who took enormous pleasure in testing his
seemed to say, *Don’t even ask how long I’ve been here, ‘cause you can’t count that high.* The barn, also of stone, was trimmed with bright blue around the windows and doors. Franc seemed to think that this would be an appropriate place to stop and ask for help. A delightful older couple emerged from the stone house, buckets and dishtowels in hand, to give whatever assistance they could. Again, rather than getting into the thick of the conversation, I stood back and tried to take the scene in, knowing that I would never ever be able to find that spot on the earth again if I tried. I had the vague notion that Breton was being spoken. In any case, the couple had seemed quite pleased to have the evening’s routine spiced up by our visit, and so we returned to our route, probably knowing very little more than we had before, but definitely a lot richer in experience.

As darkness closed in around us, I became aware that I was getting chilly, and then downright cold, and then that I could no longer feel cold. We kept walking. Claire and I decided to sing to amuse ourselves, although what was really amusing was our efforts to find songs in one language or the other that we were both capable of singing. Amazingly enough, “Me and Bobbeye McGhee” must never have made it to Rennes. Mercifully, I did not have a watch, although I knew that the alleged five hour limit had been passed somewhere back in the pre-chilly period, back near the farmhouse. We fell into single file whenever cars approached from behind. And we walked.

Eventually there came into view on the horizon a great hill/ mountain, and as we neared it, I made out the image of the Virgin, lit from behind, seemingly reaching up into the night sky, as well as out to us. *Et voilà! C’est ça! On y est!* came the chorus of voices, as though everyone instantly knew that this had to be our destination. I surmised that she must be well-known in the area. Despite the power that the Virgin’s outstretched arms might have to welcome, what chiefly struck me was how far and how high she was yet from us, and the fact that we still had to climb up that hill.

The concept of gradually sloping roads had apparently been on the same ill-
fleck of the orange sauce stood out in the darkness. And so, back down the hillside it was, to load up the cars (yes, there were cars) with the now-extremely precarious ravioli, and to, surprise, surprise, continue walking. The episode with the Virgin had apparently just been for amusement. Our next destination (I again assumed final), was Dol. I was still carrying my wool blankets.

In Dol, at last, before we were asked to do anything else, we were to be fed. I know that I have never in my life been hungrier than when I first smelled the warm food, for I cannot imagine another time in my life when I would have eaten the first course of that meal. “Soupe” it was called. And when Marie-Laure asked, “Qui veut de la soupe?”, I got my bowl ready with not another question. It was sort of orange, though less so than the ravioli, and very thin in texture, somewhat like broth, and it contained some clear, jelly-like, for lack of a better word, “blobs”, the constitution of which I did not and do not need to know. I looked away from it and ate every bite. The orange theme was continued with the ravioli; enough had evidently been rescued from the aerodynamics experiment to feed us all.

If I had been inclined to think of anything besides the joy of sitting and being full, I might have wondered if there was the even most remote possibility that any more activities were scheduled that night besides sleeping. Ah, but, yes, there was said possibility; nay, it was a reality. I had a very clear “Dorothy, you’re not in Kansas anymore” moment when I was told that we were now going to tour the Dol Cathedral. Those French students, all my age or younger, were not particularly surprised and genuinely wanted to go and hear about the history and the architecture of the Dol Cathedral, after that day, at midnight. The Dol Cathedral is reportedly one of the oldest and best known in Brittany. Indeed, it was quite the cathedral.

It was after midnight. I learned that the place where we were to sleep was not near the cathedral. There were three cars, to ferry about 60 people from the cathedral to the place where we would spend the night. The cars would go back and forth until
had taught us about Christian living. We decided that there was, in fact, a strong parallel -- that just as we had been asked to trust our leaders and follow where they led without knowing where we were headed or when we would arrive, God, too asks the same trust.

The final gathering was a celebration of Mass, as has been the case with the American religious retreats in which I have participated, in the chapel of the chateau situation right next to the retreat facility. Really, how far can one go in France and not find a chateau? *En tout cas*, the close quarters of the chapel only added to the feeling of camaraderie in the group.

That mass had all of the majesty that one would expect from a celebration in the chapel of a chateau, along with the genuine communion of a group of a people whom fatigue had brought past the point of trying impress one another. At the same time, it was, for me, the close of Chapter 1 of my time in France. The next day, I would leave Rennes before dawn, in order to be at Aeroport Charles De Gaulle by 9.30. As I knelt after communion in the little chapel (I had taken the invitation for communion from the priest at St. Marc’s as good for the whole year), I began to internalize all that had happened and all that lay ahead. The exhaustion of my body, the anticipation of crossing the Atlantic once again and thus changing worlds for a little while, made it a very emotional experience. I don’t remember what the Gospel reading was, only what Bede had to say about it. *Soyez dans la joie*, he told us: Live in joy. It is neither the past or the future for which we live. Sometimes it is not easily found, but there is richness in every present moment. I laughed to myself even in prayer as I thought of trudging through the mud the day before carrying my bedding in my arms and of sleeping on the cold attic floor that night. Yes, indeed, what better year to learn the value of that admonishment -- *soyez dans la joie* --?
It was shortly after New Year's, and one of those genuinely cold winter days that comes to Tennessee each year. I had been home for Christmas for nearly three weeks, and it was almost time to go back to Rennes. Mom and I were going to go down to Decatur for a visit just before I returned to France.

We spent a calm afternoon chatting -- Mom, Grandma, Granddaddy, and me. It quickly became clear that Granddaddy was not entirely with us. So Mom began asking him questions. Often, when people saw that he didn't quite have a real hold on what was happening at the present moment, they simply stopped bringing him into the conversation. But that afternoon, Mom just started taking whatever he said at face value and responding in kind, regardless of the "appropriateness" of his remarks. He said that "they just made him work so hard" and that "they didn't know how hard it was," that he "shouldn't have to work that hard". So she asked him what he did. He said he was "always drivin' trucks back and forth, back and forth".

"What do you carry in the trucks?"

"Ah, you know, rocks and so on."

He had driven trucks to and from the rock quarry during the construction of Watts Bar Dam before marrying my grandmother. He continued to talk, at my mother's prompting.

Gradually, I realized that I was getting a glimpse into something that most people never see -- the thoughts and life of my grandfather as a young man, unfettered by the image of "grandfather" that he had cultivated over the past twenty years. It was a stolen glance into Dud Tankersley the man and who he saw himself to be, before we his children and grandchildren became part of his world. He was a mechanic, a truck driver, a worker on the T.V.A. building project during World War II. As he talked, I was able,
just a little, and then you let ‘er fly. And the feller down there don’t know if it’s goin’
this a-way or that a-way.

With this final part he let his hands stretch out as though pitching, and then pointed his
finger in each direction as he grinned at the thought of the “feller down there” who
didn’t know “if it was goin’ this a-way or that a-way.” Then he sat, satisfied with his
lesson and pleased with himself.

As my grandmother and mother resumed conversation and he rested from so great
an exertion, I pondered what we had just witnessed. We had been granted, at this late
date in the homeward journey of his mind, an image of perfect lucidity that would stay
with us. We could not expect to see another moment like that one. There was no need.
It was enough.
The first two weeks in January, after returning from Christmas, were the hardest of the whole year. In the fall, I had the momentum of eight months of anticipation of my big jaunt--going to France--behind me. I had expected that it would be challenging and was ready for it. Then those first three months passed. It was now time for Christmas, and I actually thought that I had accomplished something. Regardless of what I had or had not learned, done or seen, it was though the mere fact that I had gone to France and stayed there three months and returned constituted some great rite of passage--as though it would be easy from then on.

I was totally unprepared for the return. I had hardly thought of France during Christmas break. And then suddenly I woke up one morning and realized that I was going back to France the next day. This time, there was no excitement or anticipation or build up to a challenge. I was simply back.

Once back in Rennes, I was, in a word, miserable. The novelty was gone. Things that had been cute or funny and all "part of the experience" in the beginning, like the annoyance of the ladies at the laundry desk if one arrived five minutes late to a laundry appointment, the need for laundry appointments (period), the long cold wait for the bus, or the hanging or meat and dairy products out the window in grocery bags (since the refrigerators had been inexplicably installed--but locked--since November) ceased to be amusing and became downright annoying. The real problem, however, was that I didn't really know why I was there any more. At first, it was simply as matter of "going to France". Well, I had come, and gone, and come back. My notes were still rather incomprehensible in most of my classes, Theresa was still my only truly close friend there, and my travels had not yet been very extensive. I slept late and frequently wondered
them, and all were delighted to be thought of and asked to come to a special event. I was not going to feel sorry for myself just because this birthday would be different. It was a unique opportunity to share friendship and a special occasion with a random collection of souls who found themselves in Rennes for that year. Later that day, Theresa and I set the wheels in motion for the party. I cleaned my room from top to bottom, rearranged the furniture, walked down to the Stoc and bought a bouquet of fresh daisies, which I placed in my bright blue vase that I gotten on sale at the Galerie Lafayette on my second day in Rennes.

On my birthday, January 21, God, my fellow exchange students, and I joined forces and gave me the best present that anyone could have. I was no longer resigned or content, but delighted to be living in France. I remained so from that point forward.
de nouvelles racines

Je peux encore goûter le cidre
je peux encore entendre la musique
je peux encore sentir le rythme dans mes pieds,
je peux encore voir vos visages...
Comment recréer l’histoire de ce qu’on a vécu ensemble?
Vous m’avez donné votre amitié
Vous m’avez donné une identité dans un endroit ou je n’en avais pas
Grace à vous, j’avais une raison de rentrer, chaque fois que je voyageais -- vous que
je savais seriez là quand je rentrais.

Vous vouliez écouter mes histoires, raconter les vôtres.
Vous vouliez voir les collines et les lacs et les gens qui résident dans mon esprit,
me faire voir les vôtres.
Vous m’avez donné des toiles sur lesquelles je peignais un passé pour partager avec
vous.
On créait tous ce qu’on connaissait, de nouveau, dans nos chambres et nos bars et
sur les routes que nous parcourions ensemble...
Mes yeux étaient les seuls à vous offrir une vision de l’Amérique,
comme les vôtres étaient les seuls à me faire voir l’Irlande...
et voilà que deux pays anglophones découvraient de nouvelles racines
en Bretagne.
winter cutting

Six weeks after Granddaddy’s baseball pitching lesson, I got another e-mail from Mom. Granddaddy had been taken to the nursing home. “Mother called me and told me that he had come after her and scared her”, Mom wrote, “and she had had to lock herself in the bathroom. It was obvious that he had to go. So Bobbie and I went down yesterday and got all the paperwork filled out.” My heart dropped as a read. I left my remaining messages un-read, and got out of the computer room as quickly as I could, to avoid seeing anyone I knew. It was time to be alone.

Within a couple of minutes, I was alone, in the grass behind Batiment E. The grass was getting its first cutting of the season, and the smell that heralded spring’s arrival was comforting if not somewhat out of place. It was there, on that grassy hillside of the Rennes II campus, that it sunk to my consciousness that Decatur as I had known it would not be the same again. Granddaddy as I had known him would not be the same. I couldn’t imagine the Granddaddy described in the e-mail. I’m sure Mom and Bobbie couldn’t either, and Grandma even less so.

I was glad that I had gone home for Christmas. Along with the light that I had seen coming from Granddaddy then, I had also seen the dimness. More practically, I had seen how difficult it had become for my grandmother to be able deal with him. One problem was that his body, at that time, suffered none of the weaknesses of his mind, whereas Grandma’s mobility was limited by having lost a leg several years earlier. During the time home, I had seen a bit of the reality of the vulnerability of Grandma’s position. It became clear that it probably would not be much longer that Grandma would be able to serve as eyes, ears, and mind for them both.

And so, as my tears fell on the grass behind Batiment E, it was for him and for her and for my mother and for our childhoods slipping ever out of reach, but not because he had moved. Perhaps I needn’t freeze time after all.
La Claddagh

C'était encore l'hiver
et presque minuit
quand on a quitté la résidence universitaire
et s'en est allé pour La Claddagh.
On ne sentait pas la froideur de la nuit.

Dedans on ne pouvait pas bouger à cause de la foule —
irlandais, français,
mais personne que nous ne connaissions.
Ce n'était que nous,
l'eau de vie,
l'air,
et la musique que jouaient les musiciens.

Le passé était ce qu'on choisissait,
l'avenir invisible à cause de la fumée,
et le présent était le monde —
là, dans un coin de La Claddagh
ou le temps s'arrêtait pour un moment
et nous enveloppait ses mains fragiles.
Contentment piled upon contentment in this fashion for a few weeks. Then, by the calendar if not by the Breton weather, it was springtime. The temporariness of our situation became evident to me as it had not before. Again, I had not counted on that part. In the beginning, a year in France had seemed so unimaginably long a time period that I never thought about the ending of it taking me by surprise. All that time, I had wanted nothing so much as the routine that I had finally found. With the coming of spring, I once again had to re-evaluate. It had not been very long since those days in January when I had had to focus so much energy into being happy in Rennes. And then all of a sudden, the time there was limited and precious.

April and late March were exciting, strange, occasionally schizophrenic times. Just as I was happier than ever in Rennes, I was also traveling more than ever. During that entire six-week stretch, the weekends found me everywhere from Paris to Budapest, but never in Rennes. Perhaps it was in this time that Rennes began to feel more ever like a home away from home. For what makes a place feel like home more than leaving it and, coming back exhausted after a long trip, relaxing with that which is familiar? Well, that’s exactly what happened. I was happy to jaunt, and happy to come back to Rennes.
La femme au bar aujourd’hui
y travaille si longtemps qu’elle a presque oublié
les rêves d’autrefois.
Le bar ne l’ennuie plus.
Quelquefois elle cherche à savoir ce que c’est qui l’ennuie...
mais, en gros, ce ne vaut pas la peine.

Ayant fini mon Jupiter, je songe
qu’après tout, c’est elle votre cosmopolite
elle qui sait qu’il existe, à l’autre cote de votre gare, un autre monde.
c’est seulement elle qui connaisse les voyageurs-
ceux dont les enfants ont déménagé à Toulouse,
les hommes d’affaire toujours en route,
et bien sur ces bizarres américains....
tous ceux qui viennent ici ayant soif, faim, fatigue --
ceux qui connaissent des villes de 3 et 5 minutes d’arrêt.

C’est elle qui entend, de temps en temps,
quand les portes s’ouvrent au bon moment,
le voix robuste du conducteur, quand il annonce aux passagers
St. _________ sur __________,
deux minutes d’arrêt!
that she is the *cosmopolitan* around here.

It is she, after all, who knows that there is another world over there beyond the station,

Only she knows the travelers-

the parents whose children have moved to Toulouse, the businessmen always on the run, and, of course, these crazy Americans... all who come here hungry, thirsty, and tired -- those who know the towns of 3 and 5 minutes d’arrêt.

It is, after all, she who hears, from time to time, when the doors open at the right moment, the robust voice of the conductor when he announces to the passengers,

*St. __________ sur ____________

deux minutes d’arrêt!*
Toi -- immense coureur en fer,
dévorant trois-cent kilomètres dans une heure,
et toujours connaissant chaque mètre de ta route d'une perfection intime --
tu entres en gare.
Discrete comme un voleur
ou un amant,
tu connais bien le code de silence,
et il faut que tes passagers le sachent aussi.
Tu vas attendre deux minutes -- pas plus.
Il n'y aura pas d'annonce;
ta présence parle pour elle-même:
Montez, tu nous appelles. Ceux qui veulent partir, venez vite. On y va.

Donc, l'agitation de l'attente dans une gare abandonnée
est transformée
en l'urgence de trouver la bonne voie et voiture,
de rien oublier --
si on n'a pas d'eau, rien à manger, tant pis --
pas de temps d'en chercher.
Dans quelques instants,
les roues tournent encore.

Qu'il soit merci ou dommage,
la nuit enveloppe tous d'une couverture homogène d'encre noire.
Les Pyrénées et les champs de la Loire,
Ou est-ce qu’elle a décidé, tout d’un coup, de descendre à Limoges?

Il serait si facile -- descendre d’un train de nuit, dans une ville, quelleconque, et disparaître...

Des que ses pieds touchent la terre à Limoges,

les roues se remettent à tourner.

Encore quatre heures jusqu’à Paris-

je vais aller me coucher pendant quelque temps.

Ce n’est pas si mauvais que ça, de se reposer ici.

Sur ma couchette, les yeux fermés pendant que j’attends le sommeil,

je songe à la fille à Limoges, espérant qu’elle avait une raison de descendre,

et à l’homme âgé, me demandant ce qu’il a vu dans l’obscurité,

et aux des centaines des ames, que le destin a mis ensembles pour cette voyage de nuit--

aux regrets de ce qu’on a laissé en Espagne, à Cerberes, à Perpignan--

aux esperances pour ce qu’on trouvera à Paris.

Enfin, je dors.

C’est un confort de savoir que nous sommes tous en route,

même si nous ne nous sentons pas tourner les roues.

*La Peste, Camus*
the ugly industrial towns and the pretty green hills,
the misery and the beauty alike --
all blend together in a vast painting:
a few points of light against the darkness...
I’m in the darkness, and I try to see clearly.*
And the wheels turn.

No way to know, in the silence of the cars,
how many people are sleeping inside.
It’s far more interesting to go from car to car,
than to try to sleep on the little couchettes.
There are others, like me, looking at the painting of light and darkness...
what’s he thinking of, I ask myself,
this old man with his eyes fixed on the night and a cigarette at his lips --
does he see something out there,
or is it simply that he can’t sleep?
The night and the movement hypnotize us;
we have nearly forgotten
that the wheels are turning.

Around two in the morning,
the conductor passes, teases me a little,
in an accent I hardly understand --
(one doesn’t hear much about sexual harassment in southern France.)
The young woman to the right leaves us in Limoges --
to do what? to go where?
Is there someone coming to meet her?
Places des Lices

The night of May 11 was so tender that it felt as though it would float away if you blew on it. There was not a bit of wind, nor the slightest touch of chill in the air. It was a heavenly, gentle cool. I had not thought Brittany capable of such a night.

Theresa and I had dinner at La Roma, one of our favorite restaurants in Rennes. It had been the site of multiple birthday celebrations among our group of friends, and it marked my personal favorite part of the town, for it was in the Place des Lices, where the Saturday market was held.

Place des Lices was a great open space, where farmers and growers all over east Brittany gathered to sell their goods. There would be rows and rows of flower stalls, stretching all the way up to the crepe stand on the rue St. Melanie. Then, all the way down to the Cathedral St. George were the vegetables. And the entire square to the left of La Roma was devoted to cheese. Perhaps the best thing about that corner of downtown was that it was within easy walking distance from the Rennes II campus in Villejean. It made me feel hopelessly romantic and European to take along a canvas bag and walk my way through the hospital grounds, over the canal, along rue de Brest, down to the corner of the town, at Place des Lices, and go shopping at the market.

Such was my route to town that evening, a rarity to have weather permitting a truly pleasant walk at night. It was even warm enough to wear my blue cotton sundress and sandals. I meandered into the Place des Lices and there at the rise of the hill, like a willful duchess surveying a party from the balcony, sat La Roma.

For dinner, I had a salad of salmon, asparagus, and avocado. Theresa and I split a demi of rose de Provence. I had sorbet -- cassis and lemon -- for dessert. Naturally, we ate out on the terrace.

Rennes was brimming with the unspeakable delight of the sudden advent of spring. Easter had felt like the wrath of the northern gales upon the unpenitent, and
been on the phone for perhaps fifteen minutes when I spoke to Granddaddy.

"Hey Granddaddy, how're you doin'?"

"Well, honey, I guess I'm all right." I was pleased that he knew what to do with a telephone. He had been in the nursing home for three months, and I suspected that this was his first encounter with a telephone since then. Could he possibly truly know that it was I? Or where I was? Or why I was calling?

I asked him how the day had been, and he replied that it had been just fine, but admitted to missing not having all the kids there. The surreal quality of the moment was tangible. For my friends and me, the end of our transient little world was already very present in our minds and thus colored our perspective in everything we experienced. Moments were lived twice at once, as themselves and as memories in the making, so conscious were we of the ethereal and fleeting quality of the world we had created. Through dinner, Theresa and I had talked of nothing but what it would be like to go back. The tender warmth of the air only added to the intensity of the night. And so, well-rehearsed in the art of memorizing moments as treasures and intoxicated by the liquid energy of the night, I spoke with Granddaddy. With Granddaddy at that time, every conversation felt like an excavation into the mysterious cavern of human memory. He was like a Rubix cube that one could never solve, a dream that one tries to remember in full, but can never fully possess. That night, however, whatever else he knew or didn't know, he called me by my name, and spoke the names of my cousins and my brother. He seemed to know that I was somewhere far away, calling home, on one of our ritual Sunday afternoon family gatherings.

And the universe fell into parallels. I stored up his words like raindrops in a bottle, knowing, like Mary, that I would "ponder these things in my heart." I hung up the phone, and began my way back down rue de Brest nice and slowly, my heart full with the poignancy of grace and loss, of past and present.

The moon was nearly full, and it glowed opaque through the clouds.
I had left to go to Germany and to the east of France, including Verdun, on the day of the translation exams. All of the exchange students, as well as our French friends who were studying English, had to take the translation exams, so we had all gathered in front of Batiment E for lunch and last-minute studying on the grass just before the tests, which began at two in the afternoon. I’d laughed to myself, looking around at the typical nature of the scene -- Teresa and Rosein teasing Sean, Ludvic and Theresa debating the best translation for a particular word, me eating camembert and soaking in sunshine. It was good to see the Americans who had just come over in February at ease in the group and pretty well prepared for the exams. It was a scene that made me smile. That was the last time that the whole group was together.

When I returned from my trip to the east, plans for the summer and addresses were on everyone’s lips. It was the end of May, and some of our number would be leaving within the week, with departures to continue for several more weeks.
Nous parlions la langue qui convenait.

En juin,
nous nous sommes dis au revoir, bon voyage, bon courage
et nous sommes rentrés,
chacun chez soi.

Et maintenant, nous nous trouvons encore au milieu du premier *nous*,
faissant ce que nous faisions avant de partir,
nous demandant aux certains moments isolés,
alors, maintenant, qui est *le nous* ?
After two more weeks in Rennes, I was traveling again, this time, thanks to a conference that my father was attending, to the most foreign and unlikely destination yet.

June 12, 1998, Moscow

Lord,

It is infinitely strange that you, whom I think that I know so well, should live in so unfathomably foreign a place. The signs here look like cryptic code and the spoken language sounds like gibberish. When I was in Germany, I felt at times a dislike at the sound of the language, but Russian seems too far removed from my reality to even draw out tangible emotion. It is simply foreign to me, in the truest sense of the word. So I have left sweet, now familiar Paris -- the language which is music to me and the sights and sounds and smells and foods and wine that I love. Here I am utterly ignorant. I cannot make a phone call, ask for directions or even ask for an apple in the market without one of our hosts at my side... I did not even begin to feel like a foreigner in France....

Once again, experiences can be contradictory.

June 16, 1998, Moscow

This trip is a bundle of contradictions. It makes me see Moscow as playful, resigned, competent to deal with what comes its way, equipped with an attitude to retain its individuality... I am relaxed here. After a few days, I find the sound of the language, as well as the people soothing. The place that I had expected to be more strange and disconcerting than anything I had experienced all year turns out to be quite different from what I had expected. There is a spirit of going with the flow, a lack of self-consciousness about these people that reminds me more of Americans than of other Europeans I have encountered... There is so very much to take in!
I was humbled to realize how far the French had yet to go. Having the words is one thing, but being able to talk to a hurting friend whom you care about in the language is quite another.

We installed ourselves in the train station creperie from which I had bid the others good-bye; I was the last to go. Ladies stopping in for a quick coffee gave side-long glances at my things piled up in the back corner, and I looked back, telling them with my eyes, yes, it’s all mine. I was overwhelmed by Karine’s generous spirit just as I had been by those of Beatrice and Sandrine. During our last meal together, she amused me with tales of her hectic departure from Memphis the previous year, her encounters with customs, her culture shock at returning to France. We finished our crepes, and then it was time to go.
Paris knocks at the door like a stranger who was once a friend
or perhaps would like to be one but doesn’t know how.
She is too proud to walk away
for she wears he charm gracefully as hair swept up above a woman’s neck.
She knows well her own allure
and cannot fathom refusal.
Nor would she stoop to acceptance
for the invitation was assumed
before ever granted.
Yet know that she will visit your door-
perhaps with a bold knock and a dazzling smile
perhaps merely a walk by your bedroom window
just close enough to let her perfume linger in the air
so that you may breathe it for a moment before you go to sleep at night.

Whatever her methods be, know that, bidden or not, she will be back.
August Returning

Granddaddy died on a Friday in August, on a day so hot that coffee drinkers started the day with iced tea instead. We had seen it coming, we thought, for some time. All the arrangements had been made; the obituary, all typed out, lacked only a date. But then you’re never really ready, regardless of what you might think. With the details mostly taken care of, we didn’t know quite what to do with ourselves. What are you supposed to do with death if not address its details?

Mom, my aunt Bobbie, Cory, Traci, and I went down to Decatur that same day. It was comforting, because this was when it began to be real, when it began to seem like a death should. Family was gathered, and the neighbors brought food. We went through a gallon of banana pudding ice cream. I thought that Grandma should have let more neighbors bring food, though. I thought it was scandalous that no one brought fried chicken. But then, Grandma was so picky; you never knew when somebody might be nasty, or simply not know how to cook it right.

Traci and I kept wishing that we would go out on the porch and talk about Granddaddy. I suppose that talking about him just seemed to us like a normal part of it - what was “fittin'”, not unlike the fried chicken. But our family never has been sentimental; I don’t suppose it was about to change then. Certainly Granddaddy wouldn’t have.

Traci and I were the last to leave that day, the day he died, and drive back to Knoxville. We rolled the windows of her Chevy Cavalier down, and let the katydids’ songs, skunk and hay smells, and humid night air join us as we drove. Then we talked about Granddaddy. Scents and sounds enveloped the tender summer night just as they had countless times before, nights she and I had spent on riverbanks and in pastures throughout childhood. We talked sentimentally about the past and matter-of-factly about the present and knew that a door on our childhood had been shut.
cousins and I rode down it in our rolling plastic egg with the smily face on the front. At that moment, the sight of their name made me feel young as I had been when I rode in that egg -- and just as vulnerable as we had been when we sped down the hill with no way to steer.

There were red roses and white lilies on the casket, all quite fragrant. At the head of the casket, we had a little tribute our Granddaddy, the real Granddaddy. There was a New York Yankees baseball cap next to a well-worn copy of The Mick, one of his favorite baseball books, along with a picture of him standing in front of the magnolia tree. Grandma laughed at the irony of his being in front of the self-same magnolia tree that he had cursed night and day because of always having to rake its leaves.

I scandalized everyone by telling Grandma’s neighbor Ruth Monroe that she “cleaned up well”, after only having met her the previous day. It earned me several “Youngun’, you won’t do” comments, simultaneously implying mild shock and amusement, but Ruth seemed to get a kick out of it.

Helen, Granddaddy’s niece whom they had gone to visit that day in September when he wanted to “go home” cried several times that evening. “He practically raised me,” she told me, hugging me to her. I was glad that she had missed seeing the haunting emptiness of his stare in the final weeks.

I liked looking at the magnolia tree picture. You looked at him, and he looked back.

Sunday was the day of the funeral, and we girls, Traci, my mother and aunt, and I, had spent the night. It was strangely comic to have all of us trying to get ready in that tiny house, with curling irons in every electric outlet and navy dresses hanging from all the doors. Even with fans going full blast in every corner, it still felt like an oven.

The minutes before the funeral were anxious. Relatives were arriving, and Bobbie, Mom, and Grandma were talking with the minister somewhere, Dad was trying
However, as we turned on to Highway 58, I knew immediately that this would be different from the stomach-tightening uncertainty of the chapel. Perhaps I had not done death like this before, but the South had. Just as Diana had stood and said, “Let us prepare ourselves to worship” in her strong, clear voice, the community of people whom I did not know appeared out of nowhere, an impromptu but very willing supporting cast, much like the French girls who helped me as I left Rennes.

A Meigs County sheriff’s car was blocking the road, sirens blinking but silent, as the deputy waved us out onto the highway, and another car went out in front, to lead us to Birchwood. We no longer had to wonder what to do. The deputies knew, the pallbearers in the fleet of Buicks and Chevys knew, Decatur knew.... the land itself seemed to know. The road as it passed by Rockholt’s Furniture and passed the courthouse, bound toward Cleveland, ribboned along in confidence, as it had in my childhood when Granddaddy used to take us to the Athens McDonald’s to get Happy Meals, just as it had in those exhaustingly short nights of vigil with Granddaddy in the Athens Community Hospital.

The jar flies buzzed with their proper monotony. The rain-parched fields cradled us in familiarity. And the highway stretched out like a cat, knowing its own course far better than we who drove upon it. We drove ever deeper into the countryside, crossing the Hiwassee River, down to the southern tip of Meigs County, and with every mile, I knew with greater certainty the rightness of the fact that we were taking Granddaddy home.

I was grateful to every culture that had ever lived on the earth for having death rituals and for passing them down, in one form or another, to the people of Meigs County. As we passed, the cars meeting us stopped and pulled over until we passed. This simple and anonymous gesture, for which no thank you notes would ever be written, touched me with at least as much profundity as the bouquets that friends had sent the day before. None of those drivers would have known Granddaddy. He had
I got restless later and suggested to my cousins that we “walk up the road”, a highly ambiguous suggestion. When we were little, it simply meant up to the Robinsons’ driveway and then back down. As the years mounted, so did the possible detours from a walk up the road. And so, propelled by the uniqueness of the day and unusually aware of our grown-up-ness, we took an unprecedented left where the road ended. There is a path, just wide enough for a small tractor, that cuts around through the woods at the back of the Robinsons’ property, and we followed it. The woods glistened, newly washed, and the water droplets on leaves caught rays of the afternoon sun. We talked of the day, of Granddaddy, of our mothers, of Grandma -- all in our typically understated way, slashing sticks aimlessly against the grass as we walked.

The others had all left when we returned to the house. We sat down on the porch with Grandma with no particular plans in mind. Traci left after a while, amid much protest from the rest of us. After a longer while, Grandma informed me that I would not be going back on my own at that time of night, which suited me fine. Cory and I were both settled in rocking chairs, and Grandma on the swing. Ruth Monroe called and further chided me about my cheeky remark. Cory and I ate baked potatoes. Hours passed, evening slipped into night, and the moon rose over the school bus garage where Granddaddy used to work.

The woods filled with the eternal summer night sounds. The katydids sang, seemingly in rhythm with the creaking of the swing.

Granddaddy and I were home.
someone else might care about. When we tell our own stories, we don’t pretend to tell everything that happens in a given period of time. Instead, we sift through our memories, sorting out the irrelevant, the irretrievable, the irreverent. There are some we hold as keepsakes, others we simply allow to slip into oblivion, and then there are those which may help to construct the story that we wish to tell. And so, as we sift, we are continually defining the story.

Yes, it is a story, not a purely factual account. We create the fictions of our lives; we choose what to tell and what to leave out, what to emphasize. Story-telling is one of the oldest arts and traditions in human history. Why is it so very enduring, so compelling? Stories give structure to the “chaos” of life. Stories have definitive beginnings, endings, and endings. They put life in relief. The “important stuff” is properly highlighted. Good listeners and good readers know to look for the “point”, the morale. And often, it may not be something typically seen as a dramatic moment. It may not be two lovers clasping in a final, tragic embrace just before death. It may be a simple statement, a choice that a character makes, a realization she comes to. And so, as stories take their place in our collective and individual consciousnesses, it becomes easier to pick out the stories in our own lives as we live them. Every day life never ends (until it ends). Just as one episode attains closure, a dozen other overlapping episodes crowd in around; the act of putting the episodes into stories gives them shape and definition. Also, it is safer as well as easier to analyze a character who is outside of ourselves. Thus, the presence of an ever-growing collection of stories in our imaginations allows us to garner instruction and inspiration from them. Explicitly putting one’s own life into the form of a story, then, is the natural next step to active reading and listening to others people’s stories.

I know that there is an enormously rich cache of memories from the year in Rennes and of the numerous changes I experienced during and after that experience, but I feel that to fully benefit from them, I must explicitly identify them. Thus, the
taking loads of pictures of such famous sites as the chateaux of the Loire Valley, the Alps and the Mediterranean. Although many such pictures did accompany me back, I found that the ones I value the most are those of old men sitting on benches smoking, light fading across fishing boats, children sailing plastic boats in public fountains. I find now that I see pictures in the East Tennessee winter landscape while driving along I-40 and in the droop of the old wooden houses of Fort Sanders while walking from my car to class. I was in a continual state of looking for and expecting strange beauty, and I am grateful that mind set has stayed with me. The process of seeing everyday visual images as pictures is much the same as that of putting everyday events into stories. So that lesson is relatively easy to identify and strive to perpetually renew.

Others are less so. When a friend asked me recently what I missed most about France, I reflected for a moment before replying that it was the liberty of being able to paint the landscape of my moment before replying that it was the liberty of being able to paint the landscape of my “other life”, my life in Tennessee, in America, from scratch, that I missed the most. We all did that for one another. We gave each other the gift of an unprejudiced listener. Of course, we often had preconceived notions about the others’ countries, but they were often inaccurate ideas, and we certainly knew nothing about the particular places from which the others hailed. And so we passed our evenings and weekends and months in the gradual unfolding of our lives for one another. Bit by bit, we came to know one another’s families, fears, pasts... all through the unchallenged lens of the speakers’ perspective. Thus, it was up to each person to “create”, in a sense, her own past. We were developing, evening by evening, the fiction of our lives for one another, engaging in that ancient tradition of oral history. I believe that the experience made us all better storytellers as well as better listeners. What is the value of the skilled listener? The listener has two functions. First, he provides the speaker with an audience and thereby validates the telling of the story. He gives motivation to the speaker for the
were unfolded in infinitely greater detail and care than they would be in other circumstances. I imagine that anyone who has shared a long-term adventure with people whom he did not know before could attest to similar exchanges. And thus it is that I hope that my stories strike a note of universality. What happens when we go away? What happens when we become the minority or the outsider? What happens when we have empty spaces in our lives, when we allow strangers to evolve into friends, when we set out to re-learn things that we thought we knew, when we undertake to explain to others what is important to us, when we undertake to listen to what is important to someone else?

Writing down what I lived last year is merely a mirror of what the other exchange students and I spent so much of our time doing: it's the telling of my story, except that this time those who were the subjects in France are now the listeners, and vice versa. In that sense, perhaps I am being true to the lessons learned, but it is none too soon. This is my first earnest attempt to tell the story of that year. I believe that in my mistaken desire not to bore or annoy others with unwanted talking about France, I have shared very little of it. The truth of the need for a listener/audience reverberates as I realize how grateful I am, in fact, to have a justification and validation for telling a story. Naturally, this merely reinforces the importance of serving as a listener to others' stories.

A related art I learned is how to live in the present. As I've stressed, the past was something that we created for each other, and the future was more vague and seemingly irrelevant than it has ever appeared to me at any other time in my life. We truly did live in and celebrate the present as never before. After all, we were delighted to be in France and to be with each other, and that was our reality. Yet, it was a suspended reality, hanging neatly on the thread between airplane tickets at either end of the scholastic year. The knowledge that we were living in such a specific reality, which would end
Finally, my hope is two-fold. First, I hope that my experience and the telling of it is useful to others in that all of us live unique and exciting experiences during which everything makes sense and falls into place, and then we are thrust back to our more hectic lives, when it becomes difficult to integrate the new perspective gained. The effect of a year is, of course, more indelible than that of a shorter adventure, but we do not often have the chance to take a year away to do something completely different. We do, however, have opportunities to go “away”, be it in the physical or metaphysical sense. We can take our minds from the “places” where they spend most of their time in ways less drastic than leaving the country for a year. Conversations, books, and special weekend events offer the chance to “depart”; these are things in which we engage all the time. And so our experiences “away” come in smaller doses, and we may have to be rather deliberate in the integration of the discoveries made. In other words, a year in another country is difficult to ignore; it demands to be dealt with. Yet every time that we step back from our routines, assumptions, and habits, we are creating space. Yes, space sometimes feels like loneliness. But this same space can often be the very fertile ground in which new growth occurs. This knowledge may be useful to keep in mind as we make the choices that continually confront us.

Secondly, I hope that my story may simply be an affirmation of the act of storytelling, for speaker and listener and for what each can garner from the act. If even one part of it becomes a part of one listener/reader’s collection of stories and thoughts that live in the imagination, then it is worth doing.

So where does this lead us? It seems that the central lessons I am taking away and seeking to integrate into a more complicated life all point in the same direction. Seeing pictures in everyday scenes, listening to and telling stories, and learning to live in the present are all different forms of living in perpetual openness, are they not? They are ways of expecting surprises in each day, as recommends author Henri Nouwen in Bread.