

PATHS TO THE CITY

Why do we write? What are we groping for? Are words able to penetrate the night? Are they able to go down that road we only half recall, along which we see only our own back receding in a heat-shimmer of memory? Can they truly take paths we have not ourselves taken? Bring back the lost? Such weights they carry, these things that arrive as if unbidden, or that we sometimes think we summon from nowhere, you would think they were beasts of burden, each line a caravan, setting out by moonlight over pale trackless sand, guided by half-forgotten stars. Perhaps, after all, we are something we never thought we were, affects of a language we have not the clues to decipher, its need to survive some half-forgotten track picked out in the bewildering star-encrusted firmament that shimmers and seems to cover, in inverse, the inconceivable dunes of the sky.

NAPOLEON'S ROADS

*His vision, from the constantly passing bars,
Has grown so weary that it cannot hold
anything else ...*

'The Panther', R.M. Rilke, trans. Stephen Mitchell

At first I thought they were windbreaks, to shield the vines and villages from the mistral, or else some charming custom of the particular area in which I found myself, a throwback to an earlier and nobler time. More than once in my mind's eye I saw some grand ducal or baronial carriage making graceful progress down one of these long, tree-lined avenues in the early autumn twilight. But no. Madame Elizabeth told me, when I mentioned them, that they were Napoleon's roads, the *routes Napoléon*, and that he had had the trees planted to shade his troops, while on manoeuvres, from the harsh high-summer sun. The idea had stuck. Even now, she said, almost two hundred years later, hardly a new road was opened that did not soon have, on either side, its long line of plane trees.

All through the region they run amongst vines. In winter the clipped stocks reach out for acres on either side of the avenues of trees like ranked armies being inspected by lines of silent officers, or else quietly waiting, before battle, for a signal. Watching them there is also something else that you have seen before – the regimental order, the long rows of stunted crosses, as if these too were somehow Napoleon's idea, or there had been an idea, a shape, before all of it, running through Napoleon's veins.

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At the Jardin des Plantes there is no panther, only a couple of aged lions in an ancient cage at an intersection of paths with a commanding view of the broad, central avenue. They do not pace, as the panther might, but sit at the base of their large rocks, looking out over the sparse winter crowds, with rheumy eyes that, it suddenly occurs to me, might well be half blind.

Another day, walking back towards the fifth *arrondissement* from the Gare d'Austerlitz, we pass the Jardin on the river side and find we can see clearly into the cage of wolves from the Cévennes. It is 4 p.m. The traffic is heavy on the Quai Saint-Bernard. The wolves are relentlessly pacing out a large figure eight, over their small hill, down the other side, along the bottom end of the enclosure, back up the hill to cross the path they have just taken, then down on our side, along the fence, back

up, crossing the path, down. Watching them, I am glad there is no panther, that he is out there somewhere, long dead, free of the cage. Paris is freezing. As we set off towards the hotel the wind picks up and an icy rain starts. I imagine the wolves pacing just to keep warm.

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Napoleon's roads are very straight and very dangerous. There is little room to manoeuvre. Drivers in this country have a lust for speed and for passing the car in front of them – a kind of wild impatience behind the steering wheel that is probably the inverse of their famous grace and civility in the office and drawing room. They are *savage*, my landlady says, and will tailgate recklessly, overtake in almost impossible places. With large trees every five metres or so, on either side of the road and only centimetres from the bitumen, there is no margin for error. Where in another country a slewing or swerving car might veer into an open field or ride up onto pavement, here there is only almost certain death, wrapped around one of Napoleon's trees.

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Coming home from Montpellier long after sunset, nearing the turn-off, using low-beam behind a car some four hundred metres in front of us, its light caged in by the long, straight avenue of trunks and

winter branches, it is as if we are speeding through a tunnel far underground, or perhaps a vein, an artery in the night. 'Do we have to take the turn-off,' my daughter asks me, 'can't we keep going? I love driving at night.' As if, after all that, there would still be home at the end of it. Or this were home for the moment, this warm capsule, flying through the dark body of things.

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A web – *une toile d'araignée* – with Paris at the centre. *Abandonnée?* Or does the web still invoke the spider?

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The first of the roads between the D32 and Puilacher, the one closest to Canet, is only one car wide but still has its row of plane trees along either side. To let past a car that is coming the other way you have to pull over to the very edge, almost into the ditch between the road and trees, or back-up a hundred metres to the highway, running an even greater risk of ditching yourself. We call this road the stink road because of the large dam beside it, full of foul-smelling tailings from the winery. On warm days when the smell is worst we try to avoid the road entirely, or else quickly wind up the windows, drive along it holding our breath.

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They are pulling up the road to Claremont in preparation for the new autoroute. Now, instead of the great trees between Canet and the Nébian turn-off, there are only the trunks, cut into segments, and the enormous, ploughed root-balls, almost lost, at sunset, in the gathering shadow below the pylons.

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On the vast plain between Paris and the sea, the roads to Chartres are lined with tall poplars, bare winter branches interlacing high over the bitumen, the cathedral at the hub, stone branches at its nave and narthex just touching, as if the builders had been dreaming of poplars, or the tree-planters dreaming of the high gothic arches, the tracing in the rose windows that seems to remember the way the winter branches, interlocking over the roadway, are like a three-dimensional map of roads in the sky, seen from far off.

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Late autumn, the harvest long over, the trimming and uprooting of stocks well underway, the cuttings and dead leaves raked into the ditches or piled in open spaces and set alight. But some of it is out of hand. Tonight eleven large blazes visible from the Paulhan turn-off alone, the fire brigades from Clermont, Gignac, Paulhan, Le Pouget all out. Sirens everywhere. And the police, driving slowly along the darkening vine-roads, looking for a culprit.

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In London, up from the Languedoc and eating Lebanese at the Gallipoli Café, I try to tell my English friend about Australia. We are talking about Shakespeare and she doesn't quite see. She tells me about the great oaks and beeches and plane trees. I try to tell her how they line the roads, how dangerous and complicated this is, how they section and shut out the countryside about them, but she can only see the trees, how ancient and solid and majestic they are, how nobly they mark out the land. Later, driving back to our borrowed flat – past Piccadilly, Trafalgar Square, the Smithfield Markets, all those old names – I remember what I had wanted to say as she spoke to me: how the great oaks and beeches of the New Forest were cut down to build the ships that discovered Tahiti and New South Wales, how on the Federal Highway, between Goulburn and Collector, there runs an avenue of poplars ('*piboulé*', Madame said – we are living on the Avenue de la Piboule – 'that is old *languedocien* for poplar') remembering the soldiers killed in Amiens, Arras, Gallipoli. And how, beside them, someone has started to grow vines.

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My daughter has an image that amuses her, of the Emperor on his days off, with a shovel and a cart full of saplings, trudging along the roads between

the grapevines, doing the planting himself. Did Napoleon get the armies to do it, we wonder, or was it gangs of prisoners, or perhaps of labourers forced away from their vineyards for the job? And if prisoners, what kind would they be? Common criminals? Political prisoners? Prisoners of war? It's like the Great Wall of China, I tell her, and perhaps not; the different work sites, different regional commands, the construction piecemeal, the intention to connect it all at last some time far into the future ('You start from Béziers, on the way to Pézenas; others will be starting at Montagnac, Saint-Jean-de-Védas, Gignac ...

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Car headlights, far back, in the rear-view mirror, like a large cat's eyes in the darkness, and I think, that's how they are, or we, coming and going, from Paulhan to Bélarga, Canet to Plaissan, if seen from out there: the panther, pacing back and forth, behind the bars of the trees.

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Approaching the Intermarché just north of Canet, along the short stretch of older trees before the river, we are passed by a speeding ambulance and twenty minutes later, coming home, find it again, with two others and a police van in a cluster blocking half of the highway. One car, front badly crushed, is still on the road and the other that had

been trying to pass it is badly crumpled on its side in the ditch. There are enough people there already. I am concerned only to drive slowly past and cannot look, but my daughter tells me they are taking a bald man out of the car in the ditch, that they've had to cut the car open to do so. The accident is just around the corner from the stink road and we take it into Puilacher, winding up the windows against the smell.

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On a hill beside Plaissan is a dolmen, though you do not get to it from Plaissan but from Le Pouget, up a long dirt track and then through thickets of some wiry brush I don't manage to get a name for. A depression, or trench, or wide grave, the earth held back by giant stones to create a narrow space for the body, though whose body no-one can say: a chieftain perhaps, two thousand years ago. And around it – you can take in almost a full circle if you stand on the huge lintel – the roads, with their snaking, parallel lines of trees, in some pattern you would need a balloon to see properly. And perhaps, if you could, other hills, other dolmens. Nazca. A summoning. Except that the tombs remain empty, pieces of text, waiting.

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Dogs on the road. Running towards me with no intention of stopping. A game of chicken. So that

I have to slow down, pull over to let them pass in their rush to get wherever they are going. Part of a hunting pack, lost, or on the scent of something, the rest of them somewhere out amongst the vines. Up in the hills they are hunting deer and wild boar, but here it is rabbits, quails bred for the purpose, released into the vines after the *vendange*, two weeks before the season starts. When you go out walking, they say, wear bright colours, stick to the paths.

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The problem with a question is that it implies its own answer. The problem with an answer is that it responds to a question. But the question that rejects its own answer? The answer that will not fit its question? The memory of the tidal flats about Mont Saint-Michel, and in the fields beyond them the stands of trees, ranked, silver in the winter light, like fragments of roads long washed away, or that never came, answers to a question no-one ever got around to asking.

How do you write like sand?

How do you write like water?

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... Artarmon, Clovelly, Clontarf, Vaucluse ...')

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To see the other roads, the other trees, is not easy. You must risk your life. Particularly if you wish to take photographs. You must pull to the side, half on and half off the bitumen, on the thin strip of unmown grass that sometimes runs between the ditch and the road itself, or turn on to one of the service paths of the vineyards. Or else come to a dangerous halt in the middle of the road itself, hoping that you can finish and be driving again before the next car comes. Bearing in mind that when you're moving you can think yourself the only driver on an otherwise deserted road, and when you stop you're likely to find that within a minute or not very much longer a second car will pass and then a third. Bearing in mind, too, that unless you stop, unless you risk your life, you may never see, in that articulated sky-map of winter branches, a large crow landing, shaking the whole, or a flight of swallows darting through, straight from a meal among the vines.

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I am beginning to drive like a Frenchman, my daughter tells me, taking greater risks, judging distances more finely, passing when there's no need to, driving at 120 in the 100 zones. I want to tell her about Rimbaud, his *'dérèglement de tous les sens'*, *'long, immense et raisonné'*. But it is not that. I have no excuse. The way, waking late at night, I can sometimes hear my blood, raging down its avenues. The way, not waking, I sometimes dream

a dream of earliest childhood, in the Humber with my mother and father, somewhere between Belgrade and Zagreb, the rain, the long straight road, the long avenues of trees. The heart like a creature pacing inside the cage of bones. Things I cannot say, cannot retrieve.

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Outside Canet, where the road narrows before the bridge, the great bruised trees, or by the Gignac crossroad in ghostly light, like scared men running, or the already-crucified, mile after mile. Spartacus. No unknown but we try to cage it, as if that were our greatest fear, the loose.

Driving into town on a Tuesday evening, on the road towards Gignac, I become aware of a giant moon and have to struggle to keep my eyes off it, to keep the car on the road. I have never felt the moon's power so strongly, so dangerously. All the way to the autoroute it comes and goes, strobing through the avenue of trees, slipping now behind a hill and appearing again, suddenly, through a cloud of vine-smoke. In Montpellier, at the café below the Aqueduct, safe amongst the buildings, I feel lucky to have survived – as if, very physically, something that had been pulling at me had at last let go.

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How to say that these roads are about what is not road, this text about what it is not? In the

apartment on the Avenue de la Piboule there is an aerial photograph of the surrounding countryside and the villages of *Les Six Clochers* – Puilacher, Tressan, Bélarga, Canet, Plaissan, Le Pouget – in such detail that we can see the roof of our own building; the tree-lined roads like dark ribbons through the lighter quadrilaterals of the vineyards, the unlined roads and paths amongst them a lighter and finer filigree. The *routes Napoléon*, then, and the openness beyond, the paragraphs of vines, whiteness.

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The road outside Capestang, or over the river at Trèbes above the ranked barges. There is a sudden turn there, as the highway that has been straight for five or six kilometres, suddenly narrows, enters the village, and you cross the bridge – and calm, a moment's slowness after the speed, the majestic trees bending over the water, forming a great bower, the thin, winding streets, the café, the *tabac*, the *boulangerie*, before highway again, out through the acres of vines.

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The plane and the poplar are fast-growing trees, but even Napoleon, planting them along his roads, can't have thought they would be tall enough to shade his troops the next year, or for several years to come. What was it then? Investment? Empire?

Belief in the future? Each year, when they did go on manoeuvres – those who lived, those who survived – the trees were a little taller, a little fuller of foliage. I imagine them singing as they marched, though perhaps it was harsher than that, only the occasional soldier, singing under his breath.

Thursday, 5.15 p.m., huge moon above Campagnan, round and full and riding low over the scattered lights. Impossible to return the next night but there at the same time Saturday, with camera. No moon. Have clearly miscalculated the rising times. Decide to pull off the road and wait anyway, to see. And within two minutes a police car appears – I can just make out the ‘*Gendarmerie*’ sign in the half-dark – and moves carefully up beside me. One of them – there are three men in the car – winds the window slowly down as I do the same. Does he think I have a shotgun? Matches?

‘*Un problème?*’

‘*Non, pas de problème ... J’attends un photo,* holding up the camera, ‘*– de la lune ...*’

‘*D’accord*’, he says, calmly – not the slightest reaction – and they drive off.

God knows what they say. Maybe nothing. The moon, after all, is a remarkable thing. Even *gendarmes* watch it. Or might have – I think as I drive away – an hour ago, as they paced the D32, huge and dangerous through the bars of the trees.