

Four French Poems

After Roissy

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After what no-one could call
a good night's sleep, but half a night
and at least some, I lumbered towards Liège
on a slow country train. More sleep
than you would have had, and I

calculated the minutes when
you must have stumbled
off the plane, and gone straggling
through Changi Airport, your head
tired, your eyes struggling open,
ankles swollen, your legs
enjoying being legs again, the
muscles stretching, the blood
starting to flow freely. Outside,
a chimney belching great
gouts of smoke, as from
an old train, white cows
head down in lush grass,
a potholed track down which
two women push infants, ragged
clothes strung out on a ragged line.

When you stepped behind
those slicing doors, reality

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simply walked away. So I sit here and yet
step around Changi's carpeted floors,
past the resplendent orchid displays,
past shining perfume shops,
past iPod and CD players, beckoning
like insinuations of happiness.

Time goes on
no matter what we do or say,
and the twisting roads, the
crooked-back farmhouse roofs,
the cigarette-chimneyed towns,
and the long, flat fields
of Belgium
stretch far away.

La Cathédrale Notre Dame

What would Our Lady, or anyone's, think
as uncaring crowds swarm past
her buttresses, and flashbulbs' lights
far outnumber the flights
of prayers? An amplified male alto
soars like a linnnet through the Gothic aisles,
unquestionably glorious. Stone everywhere as if
to keep the earth out. A brilliant father offers
confession in French, English, Italian and Japanese.

Jean Verdier, Jean Juvenal des Urse sleep
secure in their improbable faith, in
this belief museum, amidst circular
candelabras of devotion, their
deepest 'truth' barely flickering. Yet
uncertainty is a kind of grief. The cameras assert
a dearth of ideas. People exit, troop off
to the awful Tower. Bones seem stronger
than belief, yet they also rot in earth.

Remembering Jean Moulin

Remembering the scarf-necked, firm
and almost smiling face of Jean Moulin,
I looked at the statuesque,
almost imperial Arc de Triomphe,
turned and walked with a few
thousand other hurrying, dawdling,
window-gazing, free and fanciful faces
along the vision-wide boulevard, the
expansive paths of the Champs Élysee:
feet and cars and motorscooters,
and dead, wet leaves; Peugeot, Swatch,
Louis Vuitton tout en or, Lacoste
beside Fouguet's grand brasserie,
Galeries des Champs and the Galerie des Arcades,
Sephora's infinite rows of cosmétiques,
Les Comptoirs de Paris, while Yves
Rocher offered nature for a price,
a literary collection mentioned
"Les Écrivains et la Mélancolie".
Whatever's wrong with them
Club Mediterannée will take you away
from the Mediterranean, the paradisaic fields,
the peck-peck-pecking green-necked pigeons
where your purse or wallet speaks
its triumphant Esperanto, and
lights are strung out in the trees.

The Trees

It is a cloudy day when the light
does not seem ours by right
but only borrowed, and all time looks
much later than it deserves to be.
The land leans out of the window
at your elbow towards where a sunrise
of thought, of ideas, of understanding
should be. Trees mark out distances
like goals, and there are more of them
than your mind, or the light,
can hold. What are they doing there
to you? What are you doing here
racing through the uncontrolled landscape
of your life, all the stations
that will be given to you?
Near clouds clot the air and early
darkness is closing in like fear.