

When you come to a fork in the road, take it.

- Yogi Berra
(17.01.2016)

A friend called out this text, which I would otherwise never had the chutzpa to write. He was lamenting how little our scattered cohort of Houstonians, he and I and a handful of others, know about each others' lives over the past fifty years. I'll tell you my story, he emailed, if you tell me yours. He did not set out the theme I settled on, forks in the road, bifurcations, the sequence of conscious decisions and choices I made as I advanced through the murk, the fog of life. The casuistical angle I imposed on this writing assignment, my autobiographical pact with any readers it might have, does fit the innocent state of our cohort's hive mind as we left high school and went out separately into the wide world under the illusion we decide anything in life.

*

In April, 1963, I made a decision that would shape the rest of my life. I had managed to persuade Dad to let me attend McGill University in Montreal. Paris, my dream at seventeen, was out of reach, but McGill had accepted me and I had scrounged enough money cutting lawns and painting houses to contribute to the cost, of which tuition, in that day and age, was only a small part. Among the many applications I had sent out, one went to Beloit College, in Wisconsin, a private liberal arts college about which I was far from enthusiastic, measured alongside the exotic appeal of living in any place spelled with a Q, as in Quebec, where they spoke French besides. One afternoon before anyone else was home I collected the mail and found addressed to myself a letter from Beloit offering full tuition and much of the room and board there. I knew Dad would insist I accept this deal and give up on going to McGill, not only because this would cost the family less, but also because Wisconsin, though far way, on the distant side of Illinois, was at least in the US. All I had to do was tear up that letter and the path to Montreal was open. Obviously, I didn't.

*

My first two years at Beloit were riven by the Sturm und Drang that comes with that moment in life. I made a few life-long friends and had some remarkable teachers, slowly finding my way to a sense of what I wanted my major to be, comparative literature, the study of literature from trans-national perspectives. Since I was also majoring in French, I had the chance to apply for a third year abroad, one feature I had found attractive about Beloit in the first place. I was accepted into a full year course in Grenoble, France. In September, I boarded the MS Aurelia, a student chartered liner out of Manhattan from the foot of Houston Street (that's "How's-ton") for a riotous nine-day crossing to Le Havre.

*

Culture shock is no joke, even for those who long to change culture. I had a hard time at first, never had enough money. After a few months of cramped lodging in a rented room, I got invited to share the apartment of the girl-woman who eventually became my first wife, Helena. She was the daughter of an Austrian refugee from the Anschluss of Austria into Germany, not only Jewish but Socialist. Her mother was a Chinese beauty he had met serving as an engineer with the US Army as it crossed the Burma Road. Helena herself was born in Shanghai just after the war and was taken to the US as a baby in flight from the Chinese Revolution. We had an idyllic time together during those months in Grenoble, but when we returned to the States in the summer of 1966, it was clear that our relationship was not going to resist her parents' opposition to the ne'er-do-well I was, future draft resister to boot, since my mind had been made up in France. To some extent, it was Helena's own decision at that point in time to drop me which allowed me not to have to decide what to do about her myself.

*

Yes, near the end of the year in France it became clear that I was not going to Vietnam. Period! This early but unswerving decision doubtless reflected my encounter with French politics, which among my cohort in France was deeply informed by Marxism and shaped by the aftereffects of World War II, the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the crazy war in Algeria, the sequels of which were still fresh. There was a more personal factor. My first found friends among students in Grenoble were Vietnamese. Not that I thereby came to see that Vietnamese were human, though I did. These children of the elite loved making fun of me for having within a year or two to go fight for their country while they stayed in France, living the life of privileged brats with enough money to travel and ski as they wished. They also disputed my right to a relationship with Helena, whom they considered theirs by right, as an Asian woman. When I moved in with her, despite the fiction we tried to impose on everyone that we were just room-mates, not lovers, the Vietnamese boys gave up and dropped out of sight.

*

Only after I left Grenoble did I understand how much I had learned there. The summer of 1966, my Beloit roommate Howard joined me and we did as much as we could of a Grand Tour, back and forth across Italy on a Eurail Pass, over to Greece, where I ran out of money and survived on milk and potatoes for two weeks with nothing to read but a dog-eared anthology of French poetry. After I got enough money wired to pay for a ticket, I crossed Yugoslavia by train to Zurich and Paris. I was surprised at how much French I could suddenly speak.

*

Back in the USA, I discovered a world changing before my eyes. It was the summer before the Summer of Love. I was more inclined to the Beat than the Hippie ethos, though I was not all that Beat either, as I have related [here](#). In the spirit of the times, I inhaled marijuana and dropped acid. For the record, my experiments with the latter were transcendental— I don't hesitate to use

the word: they marked me for life. Somehow, I managed not to neglect my studies, though wasn't planning graduate work, as my professors urged. In my heart of hearts I wanted to go back to France and live the life of a bohemian writer, not the same thing as actually writing. But in my generation, at least the segment of it I was in, decisions about the future had to be balanced between what we wanted to do and what we were going to have to do when our number came up in the Selective Service system. Graduate school would have granted me at least one year of respite. One never knew, maybe I'd father a child, marry and get a second deferment. Maybe the war would end before I would have to refuse to step up to that line, after which I'd be not a resister, aka dodger, but deserter, subject to military law, a horrific regime. I felt compassion for all subject to it. I knew I didn't want to go there.

*

At this point another option arose. Beloit College belonged to the Association of Colleges of the Midwest, which held a Ford Foundation grant to send their BA graduates for two year stints teaching at a liberal arts college in upcountry Liberia, Cuttington College. Not my ideal solution, but adventurous and therefore appealing. My Houston draft board counted this international service as worthy of a military deferment, just as if I were in the Peace Corps, which was close to the truth. In July, 1967, I flew to Chicago for an orientation of our group, on to New York and, after Bastille Day in Paris, where I really wanted to stay but couldn't stop, then on to Liberia. While in New York I had time to drop acid with Jan, my girl-friend of the time. We spent an afternoon spaced out in Central Park. I felt life had finally begun.

*

I won't write here about Africa as I perceived it during those two years in Liberia, where I taught French and world literature. I have already written thousands on thousands of words about things African (see my [Publications](#)). Nor shall I delve at all into the subconscious reasons a young white raised in segregated Houston might have found Africa not just a challenge but a fulfillment (though I have written [here](#) about some of that). Like my American peers at Cuttington, with many of whom I remain close, I discovered a whole other world, one we set out to explore, and at a safe distance from the chaos of the late sixties in the US. Early in 1968, Louie, Tom and I made a grand tour on a Niger river boat up to Timbuktu, overland down across the Sahel to Niamey, to Ouagadougou and then by train to Abidjan in the Ivory Coast. It was, put in the phraseology of the time, mind-blowing.

*

Decisions are one thing. What unexpectedly devolves from them is another. My sojourn in Africa deeply inflected my subsequent academic career, but probably as important an influence on my personal life ensued from my encounter there in early 1968 with the American food writer Richard Olney. He spent two months at Cuttington College visiting his brother James, also a mentor with whom I stayed in touch until his death February, 2015, in Irvine, California, where

the Lucretian accidents of life had brought both of us. There are many accounts of Richard's life and his influence upon California cuisine. In no small percentage of them he is portrayed as a difficult individual, always ready with a caustic remark and convinced of his superiority. I found him charismatic, perhaps because I have considerable resources of self-esteem and was not threatened by his bluster. Ever since that meeting and others that followed in the south of France at his hillside farmhouse in Solliès-Toucas, I have lived with the ideal of his lifestyle in the back of my mind.

*

Richard's brother James, Chair of English at Cuttington College, strongly encouraged me to go to graduate school, which meant applying to Canadian universities, given my 1-A draft status. No, I was not a conscientious objector, another decision I had had to make in the mid-sixties. I never really found a way to articulate and act out my feelings about violence until I got my black belt in Aikido in 2003, as can be read in [Thoughts on Aikido](#), where it is made clear that I am not a pacifist. My two other options for exile, Sweden and France, risked harder landings. Sweden had its charms, but seemed too narrow. Nor was France a safe long-term harbour, as I learned from discreet inquiries at the French consulate. In late 1968, the summer of Expo Montreal, Canada's image was shiny. I began to imagine life as a Canadian, as I once had in the Spring of 1963 before I didn't tear up the letter from Beloit. After much correspondence, I took the best graduate school offer, which came from the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau had stated as a matter of policy that American draft resisters would be safe from prosecution in Canada and there was reasonable hope that after the standard five-year delay, I would be granted citizenship. In June, 1969, still on the right side of the law, I renewed my US passport at the American Embassy in Monrovia. On the way home to Houston for one last time, I stopped in Solliès-Toucas to visit Richard and James, spent a few days in Paris, flew to Chicago to visit high school friends, and then said farewell to my family, since as far as I knew, indeed as far as I cared, I would never be returning to the US of A.

*

I have written [here](#) about how fine a place the University of Alberta was to study in the late 1960s. The program was old-school European in orientation. My paltry Latin took a beating at first but got better as the seminars went on. I felt this isolated pocket of the world to be an Arcadian site of idyllic refuge from the war and the conflicts of the times as they played out below the 49th parallel. Avoiding as much as possible other Americans, especially fellow draft resisters, I did everything I could to pass as Canadian, working on my accent in Canadian English as only someone who has learned a second language can do. My timing was good. I helped assist at the birth of the new academic field of comparative Canadian Literature, a subject I eventually taught in both official languages. When it came time to find a dissertation topic, a crucial choice in the academic career, I vacillated for months. Juan Ferraté, an austere, intellectually exacting Catalan literary critic, had accepted to work with me — or perhaps I

should say accepted that I work with him. After proposals that would I hoped would take me away from African literature and allow me to avoid being trapped in the narrow confines of CanLit, I followed the sound advice that better career opportunities would open to me were I to stick with African literature, specializing in the Francophone side of things.

*

As much as I enjoyed those salad days in Edmonton, I was chaffing at the bit. Once again, the way I read things, I had been deflected from my dream of living in Paris. The autumn day in 1972 after I passed my candidacy exams in Edmonton I boarded a transcontinental train to Montreal where I caught the MS Pushkin for my second nine-day crossing to Le Havre. There was something magical about steamship travel, the bubble of social life aboard, especially at the bar. By the time we disembarked, I had made two new friends. One was Don, a Dutchman who had escaped puritanical post-war Holland for a life as art collector and bookstore manager in the Manfield Book Mart right across the street from McGill University, to which I had abandoned admission ten years before. The other was Jean-Eudes, a Québécois piano accompanist and conductor. Neither had any use for the other but both were close friends to me during the next year in Paris and afterwards back in Montreal.

*

That sojourn in Paris — I was twenty-eight when it was over — was followed by what felt like a chastened return to Canada. There I had been, where I always wanted to be, footloose and fancy free in Paris, though living on a pittance. Yet above everything floated menacingly the fatal date my US passport would expire, after which no more travel, maybe even incarceration if I were in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was a felon in the eyes of US government and I had taken a big risk leaving Canada, still the safest harbour. So in the summer of 1973, I returned there to log the time necessary for a new passport. My plan was to live in Montreal as long as it took to get citizenship then see how to get back to Paris. I was still living off a research grant, but soon enough had to find new income. I committed myself to finishing a dissertation for my department in Edmonton on the rationale that they had paid and were continuing to pay me for it. In the meantime, there was plenty to do there, a city and a culture I was yearning to explore.

*

Through a fluke I fell in with a group of *militants* who were organizing a new left-of-centre municipal party to oppose the autocratic administration of Jean Drapeau, the Mayor who would be bringing the Olympics to Montreal in 1976. There were six of us in the core of the *Mouvement progressiste urbain* (Progressive Urban Movement). Our plan was to unite anti-Drapeau forces in both French and English Montreal, which would mean a coalition between French-speaking but largely separatist progressives and unions on the one hand, and on the other the English Left, federalist by culture and political vision. For the record, despite the charms of many *péquistes*, *surtout québécoises*, I was firmly in the federalist camp and enjoyed mockingly calling myself by a nationalist term of abuse, *fédéraste*. My first year in Montreal was devoted to what became,

in April, 1974, the RCM (*Rassemblement des citoyens de Montréal*, the Montreal Citizens Movement). I stepped down once all the negotiations were finished, and turned back to my studies, with considerable relief. The RCM lost that election and the Olympics went ahead, but the RCM eventually won the next election and took over city hall. I look back on those years in Montréal as the high point of my bohemian youth, also as the first time in my life where I felt more or less at home, an insider come from outside.

*

It began to look like I would sink roots, paradoxically in the interstices between two language groups. I never stopped working on my dissertation (*Elite and Ideology in African Literatures* — a theme shaped by my experiences with the nationalist Left in Québec). But I needed and found part-time jobs in the English community colleges of Montreal teaching French and translation. The two friends I had met on the MS Pushkin pulled me in different directions in terms of language, English versus French, and milieu, books and cuisine versus music. At first, when I met for beer with my former political allies, especially Jean-Pierre, I would decline the invitation to become a *militant* once again by referring to my *chèvres*, goats, emblem of the Provençal hillside life Richard Olney had held up before me. In due course I did decide to return to active politics, becoming Vice-President Communications of the New Democratic Party of Québec. Our little *groupuscule* imagined that political change was effected by texts, so we wrote up our own *Thèses de décembre*, the implicit reference of whose title was the aborted Russian constitutionalist movement of 1905. I was a rank amateur when it came to real politics. This polemic text in French documents how idealistic my political thinking was.

*

The previous Spring, I had sworn allegiance to the Queen of Canada. I took the oath in French, though I declined the procedurally automatic offer to change my legal name to Georges. There are times I regret that instant of hesitation, others in which I don't. Calling myself George while speaking and writing French was both an ostentatious feather in my cap and an excuse for any errors I would make, mistakes I knew I would never be able to expunge entirely. Out of necessity but increasingly out of the genuine appeal of the translation trade, I sought out free-lance contracts in many commercial fields, but also poetry, short fiction and criticism. There was a market backed by the Canada Council for translation of Québécois literature into English. In the course of things, I became a founding member of the Canadian Association of Literary Translators. Through that same network, I was invited to audit a course on simultaneous translation at the Université de Montréal, acquiring another marketable skill. I became friends with Georg, a future lay psychoanalyst, and Larry, a young professor of comparative literature at the Université de Sherbrooke. In the summer of 1976, I moved into the latter's apartment in the McGill ghetto, nominally as caretaker during the weekdays when he was at his cottage in North Hatley in the Eastern Townships near Sherbrooke (just over the border from Vermont, I note for American readers). After a public competition, I was hired into an elite team in the corporate headquarters of the Olympics Games, housed during the events themselves in the basement of

the Olympic Village. It was the best money I had ever made, the beginning, I hoped, of a lucrative career outside of academia, intellectual in nature but rooted in practical, cross-cultural conceptual problems for which I had an apparent gift.

*

I treated the earnings from the Olympics like a windfall, seizing the chance to return to Europe, this time on my new Canadian passport, which facilitated visas, I learned. The day the Games were over, I flew to Paris, staying with Georg, who had moved there the year before with his partner Marie-Mad. From Paris we went to Budapest for the Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association. As was my custom, I gave one paper in English, a second in French. From Budapest, I took the hydrofoil alone to Vienna then train to Prague, where I was introduced to the charms of post-1968 Czech society by my Canadian translator friend, Paul Wilson, who played in the underground rock group, The Plastic People of the Universe. After a minor geopolitical incident near Cheb on the Czech-Bavarian border, one in which my Canadian passport served well, I went by train down to Solliès-Toucas to see Richard, then on to Spain, which I felt free to visit for the first time after Franco's death. This odyssey ended up in Lisbon, which was in the throes of the *Revolução dos cravos*, the Carnation Revolution which overthrew the authoritarian Estado Novo and led to the independence of the African Portuguese colonies, including Cape Verde, a country and a culture I was to have much to do with over a decade later.

*

Upon my return from Europe Helena unexpectedly flew from Berkeley to Montreal to see me. Broken off ten years before when she married, our relationship revived from its ashes. At this point in time, I was still persona non grata in the US, a felon destined for prison if apprehended. As if by way of compensation, I had committed to the New Democratic Party, to a project, as I saw it then, of bringing Scandinavian-style leftist politics to Canada. I was also a contented bachelor with no strings attached and at the prime of vigour. I managed three careers at once, the political, a professional one as a translator, and that of an aspiring academic, who knew he had not only to publish but to network, so not to perish. I was also working on a grand-scale novel, *The Revised New World*, a counterfactual fresco of life in an imaginary North America in which the Thirteen Colonies remained confined east of the Appalachians. I had a lot on my plate, loved what I was eating.

*

In early December of 1976, I defended my PhD in Edmonton. Helena joined me there and brought her seven-year old son, Andrei. We spent the Christmas holidays together. Once back, I resumed the rounds in Montreal, commuting to Sherbrooke twice a week to teach literary translation and comparative Canadian literature, spending the nights at Larry's place in North Hatley. There, looking out at the splendid vista of frozen Lake Massawippi on a brilliant, frigid January morning, I heard on the radio that Jimmy Carter's first official act as President was to

declare legal amnesty for draft resisters. I had officially lost my US citizenship after swearing allegiance to the foreign power Canada was, an edict later ruled illegal by the Supreme Court and explicitly rescinded in my case in 2009. After Carter's amnesty, I was as free as any Canadian to travel to the US. That same afternoon, a phone call came from Helena inviting me down to Berkeley. I finished the course I was teaching in Sherbrooke and, in April, after resigning from the executive of the Quebec NDP for personal reasons, so the political jargon goes, I flew to the US, putting my meager possessions, mostly books, in storage. At the border crossing, I was pulled aside, which spooked me at first. My name was on the list of the last four thousand open files to which amnesty applied, which fact the officer in charge took delight in showing me, as if it made him important too. I caught the connecting flight on to San Francisco, amazed at the turns events take.

*

What happened was a serious, unanticipated reverse culture shock. It had never dawned on me that I was throwing away a life and the prospects of several careers I had worked hard at in the different country which Canada was. Marriage was the quickest way to get a green card, but I wasn't weighing this factor when Helena and I married in a counter-cultural ceremony typical of the times. Quickly I realized that I was out of place in the US, though thoroughly at home in Berkeley. Despite my precarious professional situation, i.e. a steady state of unemployment, I took to my life with Helena and Andrei in El Cerrito, looking every afternoon out at the Golden Gate bridge to check the fog, caring for a garden and running a kitchen, which, while not in the South of France, was at least in the chilly Mediterranean climate of coastal California. I had become a father, a role never aspired to, a full-time job replete with inadvertent, accidental joys. Berkeley and its bookstores were still vibrating with the creative and intellectual energy of the late 1960s. Yet as the months went on I learned the hard way that my credentials as an academic, my skills in translation, and my political pedigree were worthless, irrelevant in the US. I had brought a little nest egg from Montreal. After several months it petered out. I hated becoming dependent on Helena, who was working towards her PhD at Berkeley in sociology. By the next spring, despite a couple of out-sourced translation contracts from Montreal, I was destitute and marginalized, without hope of any job but the most menial. Had I made a major blunder?

*

In September, 1978, I took Helena and Andrei to North Hatley where I taught a semester of courses at the Université de Sherbrooke. It was to be a trial run, for me but also for the Department, since a tenure-track position in the same field was open starting the next summer. It was a gorgeous autumn. Larry and his partner Russell were around, as was the poet D.G. Jones and his wife Monique. For Canadian Thanksgiving in early October, other friends came up from Montreal for the traditional feast, including Jean-Pierre and Anne-Marie and their daughter Sandrine. It was a fantasy world for me, a Hail Mary pass which fell to the ground. Helena spoke French and Andrei was in immersion, but by the time the snow arrived it was clear that I would

not be able to transplant them into that alien soil and would have to return to Berkeley, taking them back from where I'd brung 'em. I thanked the Department, telling them that for personal reasons I would not be applying for the permanent job.

*

Back in California, I slipped into depression. I was stuck in the same limbo as before. Helena and I bickered constantly. I have notebooks and diaries from most of my adult life. Only minimal notations remain from the first half of 1979, apart from cryptic symbols, emoji before their day, which marked our quarrels and reconciliations. I signed up for a German course. At the same time I wrote papers on the Brazilian avant-garde in the 1920s, and on the literature of West Africa in the 1930s and 1940s — as if there might be some path back to an academic career specialized in minor or marginal world literatures. Often I retreated into the perfect solitude of classical guitar. I worked on drafts of *The Revised New World*, a novel which only made sense in the bilingual world I had left behind in exchange for the illusion that Helena and I might work out our differences.

*

Then in April, on the generous recommendation of the colleagues at Sherbrooke, I was offered a one year contract to teach Canadian and American literature at the Université de Bordeaux. Helena was in the final stages of her dissertation and was as aware as I of how tenuous our relationship had become. Our returning to France did hold out the chance to return to the scene of the halcyon days of our youth and reconcile with those memories in mind. I had to be in Bordeaux by the end of September. Helena would not be free from her obligations until the end of October. So Andrei and I set out on a dream trip by train across the US, stopping in New York to see the King Kong building from atop the old World Trade Center. Then on up to Montreal. There we boarded the MS Stefan Batory for a nine-day crossing. I found an apartment in Bordeaux in time for him to enter a *classe d'accueil*. I buckled down to do the best I could at teaching, since the position might, just might, lead somewhere. In any event, it was better than being unemployed in Berkeley.

*

The contract I had in Bordeaux, technically that of *assistant associé*, could be extended a second year. The rules at play in the 1970s forbade a third extension at the same university. In other words it was possible that I could have ended up migrating around France from institution to institution, building credibility in the French system and sooner or later snagging a permanent job. Our apartment was right across from the central market, so this period of my life was graced with good wine and cheese and easy access to the raw materials of French cooking. The neighbourhood was a modest one. I loved the grit of it. There was a Portuguese family on the floor below with a boy roughly Andrei's age and a lively and congenial neighbourhood bar-café right across the street. My colleagues at the university treated me well and encouraged me to sink

roots. On my own I explored the world of wine, but more so after the November visit of Kermit Lynch, a wine merchant based in Berkeley. Richard Olney had recommended his storefront wine shop when I moved to California in 1977. I had become a regular. When Kermit learned I would be teaching in Bordeaux, he proposed we spend time tasting together on his next annual visit. So once there I had made it a point to get out as much as possible to the chateaux around on all sides, to familiarize myself with *crus* and *appellations* and wine-making. Again, Richard was invaluable for introductions, this time to wine-makers in the Bordelais. For a while, Bordeaux, stodgy and seedy at once, seemed like home. But the move there had not produced the effect Helena and I imagined. Our relationship became increasingly fraught. I realized that I would have to accompany her and Andrei back to California to bring matters to a head and to continue fathering Andrei through adolescence, a goal I had set myself. In other words, for the third time in four years, I would break off a promising career rooted in French for chronic unemployment in California.

*

In late April, 1980, I got a telegram with an irrecusable offer from Kermit. He intended to open a second storefront across the Bay in San Francisco and he wanted me to manage it. There was one condition, that I spend the summer traveling across France visiting the *vignerons* with whom he did business, building relationships and tasting in their cellars. It took a nano-second to say yes. I learned afterwards that Richard had recommended me for this too. My fluency in French, which Kermit had had the chance to measure personally in November, was also a positive factor. In June, Helena and Andrei returned to Berkeley while I began my apprenticeship in the world of wine.

*

After that summer tour of vineyards and cellars, I no longer need maps to the backroads of viticultural France. I was based in Beaune, where Kermit had an agent. She found me a room and arranged for a second-hand, stick-on-the-shaft 1955 Peugeot for transportation. A few weeks in Burgundy learning the terrain and the *lieux-dits* were followed by trips to the Rhone and Provence, where I visited Richard in my new role as wine merchant. Then I drove over the Massif central to the familiar territory of Bordeaux, up to the Loire Valley, then to Champagne and Chablis and back to Beaune. Throughout I took copious notes, conscientiously developing my palate and learning the ropes of the trade, during a spell in Alsace pruning in the vineyards. I saw more cheap hotel rooms than I would like to remember but I ate extraordinarily well anywhere I stopped for a bite to restore myself after a long day on the road. Normally, I booked four visits a day and the mid-day host provided a luncheon to show off his wines and the regional foods they complimented. Yes, I drove drunk, but not as drunk as one might imagine, since professionals spit and swallow as little as possible. One weekend I went up to Paris to serve as best man at Georg's wedding with Corinne. I was able to offer them several magnums for aging, bottles which I helped dispatch two decades later. I did worry what the future back in Berkeley would bring, but I knew I had been graced by the gods to have such a summer.

*

Before starting work in Kermit's San Pablo Avenue shop, I had a few days to buy my first car, a 1973 yellow Volkswagon square-back. Helena and I decided to separate. So I was also looking for an apartment in San Francisco, expecting by the end of the year I would be managing the second KLWM location in the Marina District. Kermit, however, scotched the plan to open a second storefront, so for the first year I commuted back and forth across the Bay Bridge staying after work in the East Bay two or three nights a week to spend time with Andrei. I discovered an aptitude for salesmanship, the five stages of which are worth citing: getting attention, raising interest, expressing conviction, evoking desire, then closing the deal. Selling something I loved was not as crass as I had feared. Also, there is an underlying intellectuality in the world of food and wine. The California cuisine movement was taking off. Chez Panisse was one of our best customers and the default table around which to host business dinners or special events. My marriage had been a failure but, I told myself, Helena and I had collaborated enough to arrange a amicable do-it-yourself no-fault divorce. California became home. I pushed aside thoughts of Montreal and France where, in any event, I would now be traveling on business every year or so.

*

My geographical compass finally swang away from France when I had my first vacation from KLWM. As wine merchant in the cosmopolitan world of Berkeley, my life began to fill up with entertaining new friends and acquaintances. One was Richard Haly, whom I met selling cheap Spanish wine. I had made it my specialty to identify and promote drinkable inexpensive wine, at which the Spanish excel. My philosophy is that the true qualities of wine are best measured and appreciated at the lower end of the economic scale. This is less an oenophilic than an oenosophic postulate. Wine is a food, containing nutrients essential for both body and mind. It should be a simple, quotidian thing. Like me, Haly loved cooking and eating artistically; [here](#) are some of our more extravagant fancy menus. He was also obsessed with Nahua, aka Aztec culture. At his suggestion, I flew to Mexico City instead of Paris in autumn of 1981. After a week in what I had been proctored by him to think of as Tenochtitlan, Mexico City, I caught an overnight train to Pátzcuaro in Michoacán, spending several days there, about which I have written [here](#). It would be the first of regular trips to Mexico, usually with Haly and his wonderful wife Debbie. I was best man at their wedding too.

*

In April, 1982, Helena and I got legally divorced. I had relocated to the East Bay, this to make it easier for Andrei to spend two or three nights a week with me instead of my spending two or three evenings with him. After a year of adjusting to the demands of work, I went forth in search of things new. I had played violin from nine to twelve. Wouldn't taking it up again be a worthy challenge in the new life I was building? Yet before investing in a quality violin, the right way to start, I put my renewed commitment to music to the test by picking up guitar again, which I had abandoned after the move to Bordeaux. I found a teacher, Jon Harris, studied with him weekly,

playing each day an hour or two in the morning before work. I never made it back to the violin. Many renowned classical guitarists passed through the Bay Area. I attended their concerts when I could, sometimes with Alfredo, a Peace Corps friend from the years in Liberia whose guitar skills had inspired me when I was a rank beginner. There was also a vibrant flamenco scene in the Bay Area, to which I was introduced by my friend Keni, from whom I eventually bought two guitars, a classical one I relied for twenty years, plus a marvelous 1969 Sobrinos de Domingo Estes. Anyone who plays flamenco as badly as I do doesn't deserve such a treasure.

*

I have been writing poems since I was sixteen, though had never spoken of myself as a poet. Recently Nancy returned to me a sheaf of twenty poems or so I passed to her when I left Montreal in 1977. Most of the poems in Memory the Mockingbird are revisions of work from either then or over the next few years in Berkeley, so it is possible to see what I was thinking in those years, assuming that poetry reflects its poet's inner world, which may be debatable. I was abetted in my growing poetic vocation by Haly, himself poet and translator of old Provençal and Nahuatl. We exchanged our creations with one other, often as we were sharing recipes, meals and bottles of wine. Another poetic co-conspirator was Emma, a Russian émigrée who provided me with word-by-word glosses of her favourites from Mandelstam, Tsvetaeva, Akhmatova, Gumilev, even Pushkin. I met Emma through my friend Neil, who knew her from the Russian bookstore in San Francisco. At least once a month I would drive over the Bay Bridge after work to drink and rant and rave with Neil in Haight-Asbury. Sometimes, we met instead in the bookstores on Telegraph Avenue, usually Moe's or Cody's. We both loved touching and smelling maybe buying and even reading obscure books in foreign languages, especially if they had been banned or repressed or merely forgotten by official culture. Neil too had been a comparatist but dropped out with disgust at the provincialism of the professionals in the field. Another erstwhile comparatist was Carole, a close friend along with her husband Jacques, who belonged to the legion of chefs in the Bay Area, many of whom were former academics. I belonged to that category myself but, selling wine to many UC-Berkeley profs, I remained at an interface between those who had gotten a leg over the academic gunnel and those who were floundering in the waves. The disparity between the relatively coddled lives of the lucky ones and my own workaday obligations grated on me. Those with jobs, especially at UC-Berkeley, naturally looked down at the simple wine salesman I was. At the same time I knew more about their fields than many of them did — immodest to say, but true. This *ressentiment* planted seeds of discontent.

*

That said, life was good. Helena got a post-doc in Hawaii and asked me to house-sit the year they were away to take care of her un-cut red Doberman Pincher. So I moved back to the house in El Cerrito, a little plot of suburban land I always liked. Kermit's business was booming. He closed the storefront shop Morgan and I had run single-handedly for six months a year and opened a larger space further along San Pablo, hiring David at the time. We were a dynamite sales team. The friendship we forged in those trenches among the glasses, bottles and cases of wine (which

each weigh about 35 lbs, I note for the record) remains golden. Yet all was not well in this paradise. Kermit proposed and then withdrew a offer that I move to Manhattan and run wholesale operations from there. I had hesitated at having to leave Andrei so soon. My base salary was at minimum wage, but there had been a generous tiered scale of percentage commissions. In 1983, they were arbitrarily revised downward. It didn't take long for me to understand that I would be dependent on Kermit's whims until I found another career. Fair enough, but I didn't have the capital to launch out on my own as an importer of wine. I knew that I wasn't perfectionist enough to become a serious chef. In those years there was no money to be made as a *sommelier*, which would have been a natural step. So I declined offers or leads to move in those directions. I needed to devise other plans.

*

Though Kermit sent me to France when he thought it necessary, Mexico was my destination of choice in those years. Haly and Debbie had moved to a small town in the sierra cloud forest in northern Puebla State where he could work on his Nahuatl. From that base the three of us made excursions down to Vera Cruz, to the Yucatan, across to Chiapas and back. Each trip was a revelation to the point I myself began to dabble in Nahuatl and then Mayan. I relished the idea of using my severance package from KLWM to set up shop in Mexico, though I realized that I'd eventually have to return with my money depleted and no real prospects. Plan B was to teach English in Japan, but because I had a PhD, no Japanese company could afford to hire me. They would have to pay the going rate for PhDs, many times more than the young teachers they were able to attract and temporarily retain in Japan. My Plan C was to return to Canada. Where and how I didn't know. Two circumstances spurred me to act. The first was that Helena got a teaching position at Dartmouth, in New Hampshire only 120 miles south of North Hatley. She would be taking Andrei with her, so the logic of my staying in the Bay Area to be near him no longer obtained. Just then my former professors and colleagues in comparative literature in Edmonton got in touch with an unusual offer. By coincidence, there would be several sabbaticals among them in the autumn of 1985. The six courses they had to replace were a perfect fit to what I had taught before. There would be no permanent position, just a sessional contract, and for considerably less money than I was making in the wine business. Nonetheless, this was a chance to launch myself back into Canadian academia. Another fortuitous turn of events was that the articles I had been working on and submitted in 1980 before leaving Bordeaux appeared suddenly in print. According to my CV, I was a productive scholar with international peer-reviewed publications on African and world literature. I gave Kermit three months notice. In July, I loaded up the VW with all my positions except a trove of books which I later had shipped up and drove with Andrei to Edmonton. From there he and I took a second fantasy trip together, the first being the Atlantic crossing to Bordeaux in 1979. We flew to Mexico City and then took the bus to Cuetzalan in the cloud forest. Andrei was fifteen and into goth and ska, so it was an adventure for him and for me to be in Mexican Highlands together. Then he joined his mother in New Hampshire. Back in Berkeley I went to one last unforgettable flamenco *juerga* in Big Sur where Keni played for Manuel Agujetas, and then, several days late, flew to Edmonton. As usual when I left one place for another, I had no idea how gone I would become.

*

It surprised me how happy I was to be back in the classroom. Stephen, with whom I had political conflicts in the 1970s, had been instrumental in getting me the sessional contract. I inherited his classes on African literature, existentialism and contemporary fiction, delighted to devise the syllabi and reading lists. I am sure that my experience selling wine facilitated my ease at selling ideas in the classroom, closing deals as it were. Feeling like a fish back in water, I set about building yet another new career. I devoted most of my savings to attending conferences, aiming at the norm for tenured professors, four a year. Stephen was the editor of the African Literature Association Bulletin. I took on the chore of managing its books received and bibliographical notice section, thereby becoming hands-on familiar with the increasing production of African literature from the 1980s on. Together, we attended the autumn 1985 ALA conference in New Orleans, taking a memorable side-trip to Cajun country. I had turned forty. I knew I needed to succeed at something reliable and long-term this time around. To do so I had to come up with a specialization which would distinguish me from a run-of-the-mill French teacher or even an Africanist, since I was always going to have to compete for jobs in African studies with the disadvantage of being white, ironic payback for having been white in apartheid Houston.

*

Since the late 1970s I had been dimly aware of an emerging sub-discipline in linguistics, creole and pidgin languages. I had had, after all, direct contact with Liberian Pidgin English, even with Louisiana French Creole, this when I worked in the Sinclair Refinery in the East End of Houston before my year in Grenoble. On one of my prospecting trips to Paris I had stumbled onto a volume of poetry in various creole languages. My first grant proposals were to study the ways nascent literatures in these languages come into being. I shall reserve for another venue discussion of how the loose threads of my prior work converged in this marvelous field of study. Suffice it to say that I set about getting a job to match my research ambitions, which would require travel. I didn't care where I would have to go for that job. I was already in Edmonton. In the eyes of most people, that is already as far from the centre of things as you can get. I was even willing to return to the States.

*

Almost the first day in Edmonton I had met Nasrin, who had the nicest smile I had ever seen. She was finishing her PhD. By the Christmas holidays we were a couple and by February living together. I began casting in all directions for jobs. The first nibble was an interview in African literature at UC-San Diego. I nurtured plans to live in Tijuana, commuting back and forth across the San Ysidro border, less congested than it is now, keeping a foot in Mexico. So during the February break, always a welcome moment of the Canadian academic year, we flew to California. We had a great trip but I knew from the interview I would not be hired. It looked as if I might have to stay in Edmonton, though the concourse of circumstances that had provided me

with a steady income the year before had revolved away. Late in the hiring season I got an offer from Rutgers University, in New Jersey, to teach mainstream French language and literature and to manage their certificate program in Business French — a matter in which I had practical experience. It was not a tenure-track position. The Department had at the same time hired someone else, an African-American woman, into the tenure-track budget line with a specialization in African literature. But there were advantages to being in New Jersey, close to Manhattan, right in the center of the biggest, most concentrated academic job market in the US. Haly and Debbie, moreover, had moved there from Mexico, returning to his hometown of Atlantic Highlands. By coincidence, I had shipped my small collection of wines for storage in his family's cellar there when I left Berkeley, since it would have been prohibitive to pay import duties to Canada the year before. So there would be some fine bottles to drink in New Jersey. I had just spent five years as a wine merchant. I still measured my days in terms of wines available which need tasting and professional evaluation. The habit of making qualitative judgments and expressing them in public, honed by years of commercially motivated oenophilia, was useful as I pursued my academic career, though I didn't see that connection until later.

*

Nasrin liked the idea of moving to the US East Coast. Born on the shores of the Caspian in northern Iran, she had been sent out of the country by her secular-minded parents two years before the 1979 Revolution. She had fallen well. The American family who hosted her in Connecticut had gone to lengths to show her life on the East Coast. Then, unable to return to Iran, she did her BA at Dalhousie in Halifax in Nova Scotia. Like me, she was profoundly attached to Canada in a way only exiles or refugees can be. But also like me she knew that moving across borders is sometimes the best thing to do, even if you are not sure you can move back. Given our problematic relationships with the nation-states and the cultures we had to deal with, formal marriage was the only way we could be together. And that was fine with us, just a bit complicated. I still held my green card. She was a naturalized Canadian. In the first instance, we needed to be married for her to accompany me to Rutgers. By the same or rather the obverse side of the token, for us to marry, at least in the eyes of Iranian law, I needed to convert to Islam. A Muslim man can marry any woman of the book (Muslim, Christian, Jew). A Muslim woman can only marry a Muslim. So I took the necessary steps to become a Muslim. We got all the paperwork in order and I performed the requisite rituals of conversion. Then I sold the yellow VW and we drove across Canada in her Honda to North Hatley, where I needed to touch base, on our way to a new life in New Jersey.

*

The proximity of Manhattan was not enough to compensate for the dreariness of New Brunswick, especially since I wasn't on a tenure-track line. Our illusions about the academic job market on the East Coast faded quickly in the face of twin realities. Hiring in the humanities and in particular in comparative literature was at an ebb. We had the additional disadvantage of being outsiders, Canadians trained in Canada with no appeal to US hiring committees and no US

network of mentors and supporters, a handicap I had faced before. I had another year of contract at Rutgers and Nasrin another year of funding. So we had a buffer, but just that. Two days after Christmas 1986, Dad died and we flew to Texas for the funeral and to help take care of his effects. When we got back, there was a letter of invitation to apply for a prestigious research fellowship, part of a Canadian government program intended to counter the brain drain of Canadian academics who were seeking positions in the US because there were none for the moment in Canada. That description fit me to a T. There would be some teaching but also money for research travel and a tentative commitment on the part of the recipient university eventually to open a tenure-track position in the field of the successful applicant. I fine-tuned my project on comparative creole literatures, sent it off and crossed my fingers. By June we repacked everything, shipped it back to Edmonton, then drove the long road we had become familiar with, the route from Montreal and Toronto above the Great Lakes to Winnipeg and then across the Prairies.

*

We had not been cut off from friends when we were in New Jersey. Paul, to whom I had sold the yellow squareback, had visited on the way to his first big trip to Europe. Wilcocks, a French professor in Edmonton I had been arguing with since I was as a graduate student, came for a few days, as did the Flemish professor of translation José Lambert. But we shared the feeling that we had come home when we got back to Edmonton. Our highrise downtown had a view over the river valley and to the Triple-A baseball stadium where the Edmonton Trappers played. I took the occasion to introduce Nasrin to the game. With the grant which had come with the fellowship and teaching release, I kept up the pace of conference papers in Canada, but also in Europe. I also began research trips to the libraries and bookstores in creole-speaking societies which figure in *Entwisted Tongues: Comparative Creole Literatures*. Those to Haïti, French Guyana, Curaçao and the Cape Verde Islands stand out in my memory. I made it a point to attend meetings of the Society for Pidgin and Creoles Linguistics and the French-language equivalent, especially when held in exotic places, these in addition to those of the African Literature Association and APÉLA, its French counterpart. It goes without saying that I was studying Persian throughout. In 1990, the University of Alberta kept its promise, opening a position in comparative literature, but also one in French. I took the one in French, Nasrin the former. To keep my links to comparative literature, I became book review editor of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*. Within a few years we got tenure, becoming Associate Professors on the same day. We were relieved, though we also feared this was a kiss of death, since we would normally never be able to find two tenured jobs anywhere else together and would be stuck in Edmonton for life.

*

With the security of tenure-track jobs, we bought a house on the southside close to the University. Nasrin's mother Oranous visited us there from Iran. Our little bungalow was far from capacious, but there was space for a guest room and an office for Nasrin, and in the basement a cubby-hole for me, as well as a window to fit a cat door for Thèse, whom we had adopted when

we first returned, and his sister, Esme. Though she had been cooped up in our high-rise for her first three years with us, Thèse never lost her hunting skills. She knew where to seek out field mice even in the snowy depths of winter, as did her successor, Xerxes, whom we rescued from a blizzard a few days after Christmas, 1995. Once the snow melted and the buds bloomed, our backyard was the scene of many al fresco dinners with friends, visitors and relatives. Both Mom and Nancy occasionally came during the winters, just to see what it was like, they said. Lore has it that you can't imagine heat when you are cold, or cold when hot. Enscounced now in Orange County, it is hard for me to recall why I loved the occasional spells of -40, the same temperature in both Celsius and Fahrenheit by the way.

*

Once I had accepted a permanent position back in Canada, I turned in my green card, as required by law. I had been travelling regularly to and through the US on the way to the Caribbean and, in 1989, to Dakar for an African Literature Association meeting. On that occasion I was informed at the border that I was no longer admissible to the States, since their data base still had me listed as a felon. It took three years to get this clerical error corrected and to cross the border without potential problems. During that time, Nasrin could come and go like any Canadian; not me. To tell the truth, though I did what had to be done to fix the situation, I took some pleasure in being returned, although illegally, to the status of outlaw. I think of this period as my second exile from the US. It was only slightly inconvenient. I was much more likely to be flying on the polar route to Europe than anywhere else. It was easy to get to the Caribbean from Montreal or Toronto. Apart from the years in Berkeley, which were fading farther and farther into memory, I had decisively pitched my tent in Canada and was doing quite well, thank you. Occasionally, especially the older I got, some perceptive interlocuter would detect traces of my American accent. I would fess up to it. It made a good story. When my travel ban was lifted in 1992, I did return to the US, to Texas to see the family and to attend conferences for which I no longer had the romantic excuse of being persona non grata not to attend. Yet as far as I and the authorities were concerned, I was a visitor in the US. I imagined I would live and die and be buried in Canada, maybe even in the frozen soil of Edmonton.

*

We had felt lucky to get tenure but the same year, 1992, the Provincial Government unilaterally slashed our salaries by 20% and seriously reduced the operating budget of the University. A wave of program rationalization and departmental mergers ensued. I had been hired into the Department of Romance Languages, which was to be consolidated into a new mega-department of Modern Languages. Nasrin was in the Department of Comparative Literature, which would also be folded into a larger amalgamation, initially by embracing Film Studies and Religious Studies. I'll spare the reader details of the turf wars which erupted. Suffice it to say that I cut my administrative teeth during this period, taking positions opposed to most of my colleagues, who wanted to preserve the status quo and their privileged autonomy as vested departments, but also

to that of the Dean, who wanted to make sure that her home department, English, remained dominant in size and influence within the Faculty as a whole. Other adversities arose. Nasrin had to have major surgery, which we were able to set put off till the summer, so that she would not miss work. Her full recovery took months. I kept publishing but felt that my project on creoles was drifting out of my reach. Maybe I had bit off more than I or anyone could chew. I was approaching fifty. Physical ailments began to accrue, nothing serious but enough to instill a sense of vulnerability and of time passing without achievement. This was my second mid-life crisis, a genre in which I specialized.

*

Nasrin and I both had a sabbatical in 1995-1996. We had not managed our money well, so sought financial advice and signed on to the diet of a strict budget and credit repayment plan that restricted our horizons. We stayed at home working on our research, with the exception of a short trip to Austin. Back to teaching full time in 1996, I began suffering strange asthmatic attacks. Given my age, I was subjected to the full array of squirrel-cage EKGs plus numerous other tests, none of which found anything wrong. Finally some consulting doctor looked at the file and suggested that I was having panic attacks, which suddenly made sense. The normal advice in such cases is to avoid stress, but I took the opposite homeopathic tack. The same Dean whose policies I had stridently opposed offered me a two-year term as Associate Dean. Better to have me inside the tent pissing out than outside pissing in, I thought to myself, echoing Lyndon Johnson on why he did not fire J. Edgar Hoover. After a weekend mulling it over and consulting with Nasrin, I jumped at the offer, which took me completely out of the classroom and into the realm of rational decision-making based on what works and what doesn't in a given university setting, or so I perceived it. An idealistic view of academic administration that to this day I would defend.

*

I started paying attention to health and fitness. Since my twenties, I had kept to sporadic programs of calisthenics, though I never played sports, which had no part in my life once I escaped the rigours of high school swim team. In Montreal I had studied jazz ballet for a year, Aikido at the same time. Two decades later in Edmonton, a friend recommended squash, which I embraced not so much for the exercise itself but as a window into a non-academic world, for mental balance. I played twice or three times a week, never above the lowest rank in tournaments, but getting tired and sweaty enough to enjoy replenishing my electrolytes afterwards, as we called having a couple of beers after a workout. For ten years my friend Sam, a insurance broker, was a regular partner on the court and in the bar afterwards. Nasrin also sought out exercise and outside contacts. Though we had many friends and loved entertaining, in the summer in our edenic backyard, we shared an increasing sense of being trapped in a narrow world which, once you are in it, doesn't allow for detours, let alone honourable exits. We travelled as much as we could, together and separately. She was able to go back to Iran for short visits which continued until the end of the first relatively liberal phase of the post-revolutionary

period (I accompanied her in 2005, my first visit and only visit so far). My duties as Associate Dean sent me to Seoul and Tokyo on diplomatic missions to universities and foundations with which we were seeking agreements. On a trip to Tokyo in 1998 I was re-introduced to Aikido by colleagues at Meiji University. I had practiced in Montreal and then again when I arrived in Berkeley, but had never gotten beyond white belt. This time my resolve held. Training two or three times a week with a Vietnamese Sensei, Tran Hiep Hoa, I moved through the ranks and earned my black belt in 2003, after the requisite five years. I have since quit the tatami mat, but lessons both physical and spiritual have stayed with me. I think of Aikido as being the only religion I have ever practiced with sincerity.

*

I returned to the classroom in Autumn of 1999, but under unusual circumstances. An Associate Dean is like a deputy sheriff. One serves at the behest of the Dean in question. When my Dean finished her second term, my own authority expired. It had been a busy term and I was proud of what I had achieved, managing the establishment of the Faculty of Arts School in Cortona, Italy, and of the Centre for Austrian and Central European Studies, both of which reflected my commitment to international exchange. When the incoming Dean appointed Nasrin to the job I had held, it was a draft of fresh air for her, one which eventually opened doors to another life we never imagined.

*

My two years of administration delayed my publishing *Entwisted Tongues: Comparative Creole Literatures*. The manuscript was finally accepted by a Dutch house in 2000, having been rejected by several US scholarly presses because there were “too many languages in it”. When the book came out I was teaching at the University of Alberta School in Cortona, the first term of the new millenium. I had been in Italy on my Grand Tour with Howard in 1966 and visited Italian wine-makers in 1982 and 1984. My prior experience in Italy was nonetheless limited, nothing like what I had had in France. It helped that I read a lot of Italian when a graduate student, so could communicate, if stiffly. The food was simply magnificent. Paul, now based in Saarbrücken with Natascha, visited, as did Nasrin. When depressed, I took the train to Rome. I learned to appreciate a siesta. Then suddenly it was over.

*

A minor miracle delayed my return to the professorial grind. I was awarded a research fellowship on the basis of the publication of my book, a year free from teaching and some travel money. Invited to speak on creole literature at a prestigious institute in Vienna in mid-winter, I took advantage of the trip to visit Paul and Natascha in Saarbrücken and then Georg and Corinne in Paris. What had begun as a chapter intended for *Entwisted Tongues* became a project which led to *Making Wawa: The Genesis of Chinook Jargon*, though its publication was years away. Things were working out well, at least in terms of perks the senior professor I had become might expect.

Nasrin was in the third and final year of her successful term as Associate Dean. Still, there was a lingering sense of dissatisfaction. Neither of us was interested in passing the remaining years of our conjoined career in Edmonton.

*

So I leapt at the chance to spend the month of May, 2002, in Innsbruck, Austria, as Gastprofessor in Linguistics, hosted by the Center for Canadian Studies there and the Centre for Austrian and Central European Studies in Edmonton. Alert readers might recall that I had been assigned the file of the latter Centre when I was Associate Dean, four years before. In Innsbruck, which has become something of a second home, I had good relations with the students and the colleagues in *Sprachwissenschaft*. At the beginning of the second week there occurred one of those events which shape the future but about which the decision seems to be made about something other than what its actual effect might be. After one of my seminars, Fritz, who had sat in because of his interest in North American Indians, asked me to have a beer with him afterwards. I hesitated for a moment, since I intended to take the train to Cortona the next morning, for old time's sake. But I impulsively agreed to a beer or so, which stretched out into many, as we sat in the declining spring sun on a terrace of the *Altstadt*. The friendship we struck that late afternoon has lasted since. The next day I was swept away into a series of events and dinners and drinking sessions with Fritz and with his buddy Bernhard, their partners Ingrid and Ulli, and then a whole crew of friends and acquaintances from their circles in Innsbruck, the friends who played, for example, in a country trash group, No Horse, No Rider. Or the proprietors and patrons of the local Gasthaus Fink and the open-till-dawn hip bar Babalon. I have written in Das Weinviertel about the dare thrown down that first May that I come back the next winter to ski down the slopes at Seegrube, which slant high above the city. About how I felt I was connecting with my Texas roots, the mutual ribbing and tall tales and surreal take-outs which make up *Schießreden*, talking shit.

*

There was thus no question where I would go at least part of my sabbatical in 2002-2003. Nasrin's own sabbatical coincided with mine again but this time we were in better financial condition. She had plans of her own, first to spend as much time as possible in Iran, which was in one of its liberal post-revolutionary phases. We worked it out that she would travel there in the autumn, myself keeping the house running and the cats happy. After the New Year I would go to Innsbruck to take up the challenge of learning to ski again. She would join me for visits in February and then again in April. I partied a lot in Innsbruck, as if I thought I'd never be able to party again. But I also worked hard on the manuscript of *Making Wawa*. I found a classical guitar teacher, Christian, with whom I studied once a week, going out for a drink afterwards. In play and work I was seeking diversion, entertainment but also distraction from the hard fact that I would soon return to the professorial ranks in Edmonton. I had seen too many senior colleagues enter heartlessly into the last years of their career then sink into a slough of despond. As has been observed, all political lives end in failure. This is the nature of politics and of human affairs. This dictum applies equally to professors.

*

Back in Edmonton, Nasrin, for her part, took serious steps to avoid her version of the same stagnation. She was recruited to stand for Dean at McMaster University in Hamilton. When she visited Innsbruck in April, we travelled to Switzerland to visit the school she had attended before coming to Canada, then to Saarbrücken to see Paul and Natasha. Her appointment as Dean was still up in the air when she flew back. I decided to take the last month of my time in Europe to do an immersion in Seville, feeding my obsession with flamenco. I spent my month there doing courses at Escuela Carpe Diem, hanging out with fellow students, all at least twenty-five years younger. I boarded in the apartment of a young artist who was struggling to make ends meet, to the point of having to have a senior citizen live in his spare room. By the time I got back to Edmonton, in June, Nasrin, suddenly Dean-to-be, had sold our Corolla and the 60th Avenue house, and bought herself a Camry and a townhouse in Ancaster, Ontario, fifteen minutes from McMaster University up over the rim of the Niagara Escarpment. I rushed around to find a place to live in Edmonton and to buy a car of my own. After packing the last items left in the 60th Avenue house and sending the cats on ahead, I flew to Ontario to help Nasrin settle in. It was the first of many roundtrip flights I made every few weeks for the next year. At the end of August, I returned alone to Edmonton to a highrise apartment overlooking the mighty Saskatchewan River. It was a spectacular view. There was the distinct possibility that Edmonton, which had evolved strikingly since I first set eyes on it 34 years before, would be my home for several years more. While inconvenient, that would not be the end of the world, I told myself.

*

That last year in Edmonton, 2003-2004, concealed many surprises. It was far from sure that I would find a new position down east. As a hedge, hoping to spice up my *fin de carrière*, I sought out new interests, anything to avoid the vacuous dead end I felt impending. I can't recall exactly how I met the Portuguese Honourary Counsel, Aurélio. He urged me to return to the wine world and import Portuguese wines. I took the steps to found my own company, *Caravel*, and planned a prospecting trip to Portugal. The summer before I had earned my black belt in Aikido, but changes at the dojo led me to leave Sensei Tran and begin practice with a small group of fellow black belts, potentially with the idea to set up a dojo on our own. I continued playing squash regularly with Sam. I spent time carousing with the new crop of graduate students. Early that summer, shortly after I returned from Spain, Georg died suddenly in Paris. I was deeply moved by his early death and wrote about it in *The Death of a Psychoanalyst*, which won a Faculty prize for non-fiction providing \$10,000 funding for travel virtually anywhere I wanted. I was also back to playing guitar, so my plan was to spend the next summer in Latin American studying the latest trends in classical guitar. Instead I spent as much time as I had free back in Seville studying flamenco guitar with David "El Poeta", one last self-indulgent fling before the new life I was soon to sign onto.

*

In the autumn of 2002, before I went to Austria, I had served on the selection committee for a new Dean of Arts in Edmonton who would take office in 2003. I was well qualified for this chore. During my term as Associate Dean, the buck hadn't stopped with me, but I had seen up close what it meant to make public decisions and to gather a consensus behind them. The selection process made me aware I was as qualified as, if not more so than any of the candidates we interviewed. Not that I wanted to be Dean in Edmonton. I had declined to stand in 1999, and again in 2002. Sitting on the selection committee is a well-known evasive manoeuvre for those who do not want to stand. Nor, at that point in time, did I know Nasrin would be named Dean of Humanities at McMaster within a year. This assignment made me rethink my attitude to administration. Despite the difficulties of herding academic cats, as the well-worn phrase puts it, one does get some of the felines to move around. I began following ads in the professional newsletters, looking for jobs with international outreach, hoping to get abroad again. The first listing that caught my eye was Dean of Arts at the University of Ottawa, a bilingual institution which required fluent French. I eventually got that job, perhaps due more to the fractured nature of the academic market in Canada than my own qualities. My generation of French-speaking professors with administrative experience were usually nationalist *Québécois* who tended not to want to move to the federal capital, even if they could reside in Quebec right across the river from the University and Parliament. At the same time, the larger number of qualified former or current Associate Deans in my peer group from the rest of Canada did not have sufficient command of French. I interviewed with the head-hunters in December, in January in Ottawa and again in March before the full Faculty, telling myself that I would make whatever changes I had to make in my life and personal habits necessary for success. There was also the issue of the pay raise, which would boost my pension significantly, a matter whose importance had finally caught my attention as I approached sixty.

*

During the March interviews, Nasrin flew up from Hamilton to have lunch with the Rector at Ottawa, who was sensitive to the fact that he was about to hire the husband of a Dean at a competing university, his alma mater, moreover. This is the point to mention that Nasrin and I had always operated on the principle that suspicion of conflict of interest alone undermines the integrity of academic decisions. A disgruntled student had launched a complaint in 1999 that she and I had colluded against her as a couple. This case, thoroughly investigated by the higher administration, was eventually dismissed without prejudice. We knew that we needed to operate as transparently as possible to fend off the kind of rumours which thrive in the academic petri dish. Once my appointment to Ottawa was announced, we became an anomaly, a married couple in positions of discretionary power in two competing institutions. There was never any issue.

*

Re-reading these notes I can see this narrative, which in my youth turned around desires, aspirations and ambitions personal, political and intellectual, now focuses on choices made

within Nasrin's and my careers. This is not surprising. To have a career means to have made choices. Each choice is a bit spent, after which there are fewer and fewer in the kitty, which shrinks with time. I won't rehearse here details of my deanship 2004-2009 (a brief account of which can be found in [Academic Administration](#)). Here, as always in life history, it is impossible to say what would have happened if something else which did hadn't -- or any other variation or permutation of these cascading conditional clauses. There are no parallel lives. Sometimes, though, the same life doubles back on itself. For almost a half century I had wanted to live and work in French. This is what happened in Ottawa and thereafter, from 2007 on, when I served as *Président* of AFELSH, the Paris-based association of French-language Arts Faculties (website, which I still administer, [here](#)), a role requiring repeated trips to multiple points in the francophone world beyond Paris: Beyrouth, Dakar, Tunisia, Cameroon. The airmiles continued to accumulate. There were moments in that hurly-burly when I was amazed to find myself living out my adolescent dream of becoming French.

*

The first two years in Ottawa I would fly down to Hamilton almost every weekend. I assumed that I would retire as Dean after one five-year term, at sixty-four. At that point in time I thought I would work out some comfortable transition, keeping a foot in Ottawa, maybe a cottage across the river in Quebec, but based in Ancaster with Nasrin. Then something like lightning struck. Out of nowhere, Nasrin got an offer to move to the University of California at Irvine to be the founding director of its Center for Persian Studies. It was a great opportunity, but throwing over a deanship and leaving Canada, which had been our home together for twenty years, was no easy call. I was leery about moving to California once again without prospects of my own. This option had previously not worked out well, to say the least. Yet circumstances had changed, I told myself. People spend good money to vacation in Southern California. What better place to retire? I knew I didn't want to resign before the end of my contract as Dean, not only out of professional ethics, but also because topping up my pension had become an even more pressing concern. So in the summer in 2006 when Nasrin, as part of her recruitment package got a spacious home in University Hills I moved all but my essential possessions there. I became what Lucia, my secretary in Ottawa, called the Flying Dean: shuttling at least once a month from Ottawa through Chicago O'Hare to John Wayne in Orange County. To that travel was added the trips relating to my office as Dean and my position as *Président* of AFELSH. And every February I arranged to spend two weeks in Innsbruck, welcome periods of respite from the rule-driven life of a Dean.

Postscriptum

I have chosen to break off this narrative with my retirement to Southern California in 2009, not because there remained no forks left in my road. *Au contraire!* Choices we make in retirement are nonetheless different from those faced before. They are less anchored. In an odd way, though, those made in the late season of life are like those of childhood. As long as nothing catastrophic happens, choice is play for the young. Also for the old. Play for children, the psychologists say, is

training for the decisions we make later on. But soon for me there will be nothing later on. I only hope that when my last fork comes up, I can recognize and take it the way I decide to.