

Betwixt

This morning, when I wake up, my world is spinning on its axis just as it should, humming along as usual.

Those who know have spent the night sliding the right keys in the right locks, redrawing the borders, and reining in the hurricanes.

Before seven o'clock this morning, my world was still standing, all logic and harmony on rue Bayne in Montreal, Quebec.

In the tiny apartment, on weekdays, dictionaries line up by the cockroaches. To everything there is a season: the day is for dictionaries, the night for cockroaches. Weekends are less orderly, roaches and dictionaries frolicking in orgiastic chaos. Their spawn are words with three heads, spontaneous abortions, and, oh, the mess on Monday mornings.

During the day, orders are given in French, and at night, cockroaches meander around on their umpteen legs. Weekends are like dreams, filled with snippets of mixed languages and smells.

I fall asleep at home and wake up in the West—and in French, besides! French, the language of culture, the great one. French speaks of history, of humanity, of transcendence. For the more modest words of everyday life, I don't dare use French, that *grande dame*.

I am reduced to silence. Some mornings I wake up on the Romanian side and other days on the French side of the bed. Most often, my eyes half open, I wait under the blankets for a long time, in the middle of the jumble. Neither fish nor fowl, half French, half Romanian, my brain is bewildered by the effort of just getting to the words.

Do my dreams affect the language I wake up in?

Or maybe it's about what side of the bed I get up on? Left for French, the language of the left hand, the Left Bank, a bed left behind. Romanian is on the right side, where the rug at my feet makes getting up easier.

Linguistic quickening is a temporary state, a state of doubt, self-censorship.

Is it *puisque* or *parce que*, is it *bientôt* or *tantôt*—

since or because, soon or later?

Nostalgic echoes of a time when access to words was direct, instantaneous, luminous. Words used to be well behaved, waiting patiently for someone to lure them out. They recognized each other, called each other by name. Words knew their place, they waited their turn. When I was a child, sometimes they would even take the first step.

We spoke naturally, without any existential drama, we said *mom, dog, dad, gone, and give*. We were told *thank you and well done*.

Speaking was like breathing, like seeing or eating. It just was, there was no ulterior motive.

Yet all it took was a foreign visitor or a subtitled film, a language class, the slightest trace of migration. Confusion, revelation! All at once you were no longer merely speaking, you were speaking a particular language.

During holidays on the Black Sea, the beach was full of Germans, Italians, and Scandinavians. They were beautiful, sculpted by the light glinting off their perfumed tanning oil. I watched, alert, taking in the foreign smells, none of which my nostrils had ever sampled before. I craved the exotic.

The tourists from away wore colourful bath-

ing suits and stylish sunglasses. Even their wrinkles were different from our parents' wrinkles. They must have had other worries, which traced other lines on their faces.

We spoke with them in a kind of foreignese. Most of the time, a little French was enough.

The foreigners on the beach were as worthy of admiration as the Black Sea itself. Plus they had chocolate.