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Skateboarding with Mouloud

On a frozen morning this November past, I was tacking through alleys on the South Side of Chicago, angling toward a friend's apartment for breakfast, when I locked eyes with a man who was digging through a garbage bin, a shopping cart waiting beside him.

Nelson Algren wrote that you never truly love Chicago until you love its alleys, 'where the bright and morning faces of old familiar friends wear the anxious midnight eyes of strangers a long way from home'. Among those anxious eyes are the hungry eyes of Chicago's gleaners, who salvage a narrow living from our neighbors' discarded excesses.

This man had little to show for his morning's work: a few aluminum cans, random angles of iron and coils of wire. But in the shopping cart he had something that once was mine, and I recognized it at once. It was a skateboard I had piloted on one perfect afternoon three and a half years prior, and upon which I had made a most rewarding acquaintance. It was on that skateboard that I got to know Jean Grenier and his cat, Mouloud.

It was the last day of classes in June 2005. I emerged from the Classics Building onto a sun-drenched quadrangle and found myself in the spell of two beauties: it was a beautiful afternoon – a perfect example of the mildness Chicago can find between its extremes – and it was the end of a beautiful year, my first teaching writing to MA students at the University of Chicago. That task had been challenging, but with the challenge behind me and 120 masters newly loosed upon the world, it was nothing now but satisfying. Now I wanted for nothing, except that it was spring, and as Mark Twain writes of spring: you don't quite know what it is you do want, but it just fairly makes your heart ache, you want it so.

It's a fine condition in which to meet a new love, living or literary.

A breeze crossed the quadrangle, and the oak leaves whispered of freedom. I decided to walk the fifty blocks home and resolved to be in no hurry about it. And what better first detour than a quick descent into the Seminary Co-op Bookstore, where I found Green Integer's little edition of *Islands*, a collection of Jean Grenier's lyrical essays, in a neat stack beside the checkout counter. As I returned to the perfect afternoon, I began to read.

It would prove fateful that I began the collection at its second essay. My melancholic, misanthropic self was equally drawn to the first two titles – 'Attraction of the Void' and 'Mouloud the Cat' – but the first sentence of 'Attraction' ('In each life, particularly at its dawn, there exists a moment which determines everything') could not rival the springy appeal, on this perfect afternoon, of the first line of 'Mouloud':

The world of animals is made of silences and leaps.

From that sentence I could not break from the essay, not for portentous stoplights, not for menacing automobiles. We are always searching for the next book that will hook us with its first line and carry us, outside of time, to its final period. But who would expect that hook in the first line of an essay, an essay translated from the French, an essay about a cat? I found I was not just reading about a cat, I was reading about the *aboutness* of cats:

In the afternoon, stretched out on a bed, he purrs, paws thrust forward. This morning he came early, and due to a riotous day yesterday will remain here the entire day. He is more affectionate than usual: he is tired. I love him: he abolishes the distance which, at every waking, is reborn between the world and myself.

In Grenier's minimalism, Mouloud consists of a purr and paws. That's all Mouloud needs to help Grenier stretch his own paws for a lyrical truth, the certainty of which derives from its lovely recapitulation of experience. Anyone who has appreciated a cat will recognize the feline power to reacquaint, by example, the divided human with the pleasure of living:

Mouloud is happy. Taking part in the combat to which the world eternally submits itself, he does not penetrate the illusion which makes him act. He plays and he does not dream of watching himself play. I am the one who watches him, enchanted in seeing him occupy his role with a precision of movements leaving no place void. At each and every instant he is entirely one with his action ... When I return to myself this plenitude saddens me. I feel human, which is to say, a mutilated being.

Now I had to hurry home so I could read unmenaced by growling cars, but I had to hurry home without ceasing to read. I slipped from the streets to the alleys. Chicago's alleys are quieter, less perilous with traffic, but mined with other distractions – unexpected wildlife, unintended glimpses of humanity, unburied treasures: such as, on this afternoon, half protruding from a garbage bin, a battered and sun-bleached skateboard.

It was a classic wood board with a kick tail, sandpaper grip, clay wheels, the kind the older, cooler skaters rode in the 1970s, when I was an adolescent and skateboarding was resurgent. In my sun-struck, spring-fevered, prose-drunk condition, I had found my ride home. The clay wheels complained on the stony pavement, the bearings wailed for grease, but she rolled, and now I surfed through the alleys, still reading 'Mouloud the Cat'.

I would not learn until later that Albert Camus also discovered Grenier's essays in the street. But owing to a lack of skateboards in 1933 Algiers, he was forced to run home. In a preface to the 1959 edition of *Islands*, Camus wrote: 'I would like to return to that evening when, having opened the volume in the street and read its first lines, I instantly shut it, and grasping it against myself ran to my room in order to devour it without witness.'

The essays demand to be read without witness because of the intimacy of the wonder they inspire. Like many stories about animals, 'Mouloud' ends in sadness, but the sadness is not just for a cat or for a man. It is sadness for our mutual plight. As exactly as the essay describes cats, it implies our difference from cats:

Their life is at the antipodes of those of other animals. They are awake while these others sleep. At night, gardens are transformed into jungles, and roofs are peopled with black, white, and grey phantoms, similar to the penitents of medieval brotherhoods. Beings of luxury for whom all work is servile, they give themselves up to festive entertainments to which only the richest among us can ever hope to aspire.

As I rolled on and read on, I discovered passages it would be unbearable to forget, passages like the ones above, and not wanting to pause to dig for a pencil, I bookmarked these pages with ash leaves. Now, whenever I open the book, I rediscover those leaves, pressed artifacts of that perfect afternoon.

When I reached my apartment, I parked the skateboard beside the back door. Inside, I devoured, without witness, Mouloud's ending. It had already been clear, as I have said, that 'Mouloud the Cat' is not just about cats but about the aboutness of cats. And that it is, by reflection, about humans. But at its ending, its aboutness multiplies. It becomes about much more: about being alive, about being separated from life, about life going on, about expedience.

Grenier was a teacher at the Lycée Bugeaud in Algiers, then a professor at the University of Algiers. His star pupil at both institutions was Camus. Although Grenier taught philosophy, Camus remembers him as a writing teacher, and Grenier's imprint is all over his pupil's writing. Camus also excels at stretching his paws for lyrical truths, as in this example from his *Notebooks*: 'We must have one love in our lives, one great love, to give us an alibi for all the moments of motiveless despair.'

Camus's lyrical moments may not represent his best philosophy, but they may represent his best writing, and the philosophy they offer is human, concrete and livable. He derived his courage to write them in part from his teacher. Camus describes Grenier as 'a man born on other shores, yet also in love with light and the body's splendor, who came to tell us in inimitable language that these appearances are beautiful, but that they must perish and that it is necessary, therefore, to love them without hope.'

Drained of hope, but filled with light, I could react to the experience of Grenier's essay only by conspiring to replicate the experience in others. I turned to the pages marked with ash leaves and typed up the passages there. I sent them by email to everyone I knew who possessed the requisite sensitivity, to lovers of writing and to lovers of cats. On my next commute to Hyde Park I bought that neat stack of *Islands*. I gave copies to friends, to promising philosophers, to undiscovered poets. As autumn approached, I maneuvered to include the essay in the reading list of a non-fiction workshop I had been contracted to teach. My motive was unselfish – that others might enjoy the world of this essay as I had – but also selfish, because no one wants to enter such a world only to be alone within it.

Drained of hope, but filled with light, I felt newly justified in my melancholy

and my misanthropy – my melancholy for our mutual plight, my misanthropy for our human failure to rise above it. In the end, Mouloud and the race of cats cannot expect too much from us, and they don't. They know us better than we know ourselves. Their complaint – whether we fail to give them food or freedom or love – is that we don't make the most of living.

The skateboard remained beside my back door that summer and autumn. In winter, I would shake the snow from it and move it to the basement. I would forget it there, even when I moved out of the building. I would not ride it again, nor would I consider it, until three and a half years hence on the frozen November morning when I spotted it in the gleaner's shopping cart.

Mouloud is an Arabic word, Grenier's translator tells us, a past participle for 'to be born'. The gleaner – he might be named Mouloud. And me, for that matter, I might too.

As our eyes met, I said: 'Hey, buddy.' He said: 'How ya doin'?' I glanced at the skateboard. I considered asking him if I might buy it from him, or borrow it for just one more ride. But I let the skateboard pass. I let it pass because, like that perfect afternoon, it belonged already to the past, to memory, and finally to forgetting. As does Mouloud. As does each of us, every one.

This essay first appeared in the Winter 2009 issue of Contrary magazine.

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Submissions are welcome from writers from these regions or residing there, as well as non-inhabitants who have written on or travelled through these parts of the world.

To contribute work, please contact the editor at mitchell.albert@internationalpen.org.uk.

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