

Portfolio Submission

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Red Delicious (Poetry)
En France (Personal Essay)
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Writer's Statement

"It's an absolute brawl between you and your words," my poetry workshop teacher said. "Whatever is left standing at the end is what's supposed to be there."

I realized pretty quickly that the comparison between writing and a brawl captured everything I've ever felt about the process. Overwhelming passion in the beginning. Kind of a blind rage – rage isn't quite it, but it's close – where my mind is so stolen by the idea I have that I only see words to bring it to life – some sort of magic spell. A frightening, exhilarating takeover. I'm usually certain that what is in my mind right now is more pure and perfect than it will ever be. So there is no alternative to writing it down and making it real. Sometimes, it stops here. Two or three lines, occasionally. More often than not, only two or three words appear. Sometimes, when I'm lucky, it goes further. I can write stanzas or paragraphs. I can start to revise. I pull out thesauruses in a quest for falsely attainable perfection. In the middle, though, like a brawl, stalemates arise. My words and I face-off in a staring contest, backed against walls or ropes or in the hands of friends, regaining composure and becoming more agitated. And so we go at it again, with varying results.

The thing is, though, no matter the result, the endorphins will get to me. They say they're as addictive as a drug, and that's true. I come out with battle scars every time, and because they add character, I don't mind. There is nothing better than the verve of creation and destruction, or their interchangeability's essential irony.

So I'll brawl with words any chance I get. If I don't, nothing will stand at all.

Red Delicious

The Evil Stepmother would envy
the glossy-covered red ones
and Eve would have given in
without the snake's suggestion.

They're bloody in their hued
intensity, too voluptuous
in the corset shape. This is
what they call *dangerous*.

So, is it wrong to presume
an apple, a diva? All shine,
no substance, save for the
grainy white pulp.

Still, the backstory:
a tender orphan, plucked
from the family tree. Yes,

they'll say, licking lips,

that one's perfect.

En France

Day 1, Sunday:

Andrea and I are sitting in our Eurail seats, flipping like maniacs through Rick Steves' French phrasebook and a tattered dictionary, quizzing each other as the green of the countryside whips past our windows.

"How do you say 'grapes?'" Andrea asks.

"Les raisins, oui?"

"Right."

"What do they call raisins, then?" I grab for the dictionary.

We've been at it for hours already, in bursts: Waiting for our flight in Toronto, on the plane over Greenland, in the train station at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris. We try to soak up words and phrases like sorts of linguistic sponges, but only some of it stays. Learning a foreign tongue and running on very, very little sleep hasn't been going so well. We're running on adrenaline, but it's worked so far.

Three more hours, two more hours, we chant to ourselves, just a few more hours and we'll be in Hyères.

Day 2, Monday:

Last night, our host parents, Nathalie and Thierry took us to their favorite place to view the sea and all of Hyères. It's close to an old fort that Nathalie warns us is ugly. She tells us that the other fort is better, prettier. Yes, there are two medieval forts in a small French town by the sea.

While we're there, Thierry shows us what we're seeing on a map, then shows us the real thing. He points out the two narrow straits of land that jut out into the ocean. Between them, he says, are salt marshes and *les flamants*. When we tell him that in English, *les flamants* are called flamingos, Nathalie, listening in, bursts out laughing.

Day 4, Wednesday:

I didn't know that palm trees and pine trees could exist so harmoniously, that cobblestoned alleyways could be so labyrinthine, or that skies could be so surely blue. I haven't seen a cloud – not even a wisp – since we arrived.

Every morning after I wake up Andrea and I dress, we stumble down the stairs and have brioche with Nutella for breakfast. We laugh with Nathalie about the fact that even after practicing, neither one of us can successfully pronounce *yaourt* – yoghurt – without stumbling in the tangle of vowels.

When we go to our class in the morning, there are cliques of different students, all from different countries around the world. We play the guessing game at break time, trying to identify the language and jumbles of words that fall off the other students' tongues. During class, we talk about the conjugation of "-er verbs" as easily as we talk about Barack Obama; the proper placement of adjectives as openly as the *banalisation* of sex.

It's the honesty that I love. The frankness. No one hides anything. Even though we're American, Thierry tells us without worry that he couldn't hate Bush more. If Nathalie and Thierry argue, or if their grown son Florian stops by and is tired and moody, it's okay. They argue, and they love each other. They're unapologetic, and it makes me wish the entire world lived and loved as they do.

Everyone wraps their arms around their loved ones' waists and shoulders. If you love someone, you're close to them, physically and mentally. No discrete kissing, no coy handholding. Handshakes are firmer. They grip your palm, squeeze your shoulder. When you bump into people on the street, there are no *Oh! Excusez-moi's*. For a wonderful dinner, there aren't any formal *merci beaucoup's*. It's as if the American version of a common courtesy is understood fact. You know that people are listening to you, because they look you in the eye and say *Oui?* and *Ah, bon!* and *Non! Vraiment?* in all the right places.

Day 7, Saturday:

We went to Nice for a day. How unreal is that? We rode on a crowded train, had to ask people to get out of our seats with a polite, "Excusez-moi, messieurs." They complied with a little bow and sauntered off to find somewhere else. A mother and her little boy were sitting in front of us. His round blue eyes kept popping over the edge of the seat, and he gave little flirtatious smiles to Andrea and showed her his toy car.

Why does everything seem more perfect when you see it out of train windows? We pass small villages with pastel-roofed houses, rolling bright green hills and pastures, industrialized towns, and the ocean. People always talk about water sparkling, but this water shimmered. The sky still looked as if it had never seen a cloud.

Nice positively bustled. We spot the first other American tourists we've seen since we arrived in France. Every store is packed, but we eventually find our way to a small sandwich shop and then to a large, bright plaza where hip-hop dancers are performing in front of a fountain. We laugh with the rest of the crowd as they dance with the audience. When we finish our sandwiches, we wander towards the beach, into massive department buildings and tiny dimmed shops selling olive oil and lavender candles. The old part of Nice is the most gorgeous. There are apartment buildings with elaborate carvings, curved balconies, and massive, inviting doors. The opera house has wrought-iron lanterns with tiny cherubic faces along the sides. I wish the rest of the world was so detailed.

It's nice to know that we're going back to somewhere quiet when we get on the train that evening. Nice, as Andrea's dad says, is nice. But, *il y a beaucoup du monde là*. Literally, there's a lot of the world there; it's crowded. As we fly along the tracks, the sun sets. We pass the same sights on the way back: the ocean, industrialized towns, green hills and pastures, pastel-roofed houses, all in the gold light of the sun. Finally, though, we're home.

Yes, after less than a week, Hyères is home.

Day 9, Monday:

In the afternoons, after *le déjeuner*, we wander. We traipse through smooth, cobblestoned streets, only wide enough for little mopeds. We move under strings of laundry and open painted shutters. There are fluffy gray cats and strangely dainty bursts of graffiti. Restaurants and art galleries, open markets and gelato stands are hidden away. We find modest churches with round windows and marble plazas with modern fountains.

If we were simply linguistic sponges at the beginning of the trip, we have become cultural ones. We soak in the French couples who sit at cafés with a bottle of wine, try to have conversations in French as we duck into shops with a polite "*bonjour!*" and a "*merci beaucoup*" when we leave. On the way back home, we go to the bakery down the street and buy two baguettes. Translating rapid-fire numbers isn't so hard anymore, and we can count Euros as quickly as dollars.

If we time it right, we arrive at the bakery right when they take out fresh baguettes. When we ask for *deux baguettes, s'il vous plait*, they grab two loaves, wrap them up in paper, and hand them to us. They're so warm still they nearly sear our fingertips, but strangely, it's the best feeling in the world. We carry them under our arms, fancy ourselves *les filles françaises*, and break off the very end.

As if we could resist, at that point.

Day 10, Tuesday:

With Nathalie's question posed, "Do you mind going over to meet my mom? She wants to meet you and feed you cake," how could we refuse? We drove up hill after hill to reach their house and stepped out of the car only to have our cheeks kissed and shoulders squeezed. Nathalie's mom declared, grinning, with her hands in the air, *Je n'ai avant jamais vu les filles américaines!* She had never seen American girls before and was positively gleeful when she pushed us towards conversation and a lemon tart on the back terrace.

We were asked question after question about our lives. When I told them I played soccer, Nathalie's dad ran inside to find pictures from his days on *une équipe de foot*. Afterwards, with as much lemon tart as we could handle pushed on to our plates by Nathalie's mother, our hands were slapped away from helping with the dishes, and Nathalie's dad took us around his garden, puffing out his chest when he pointed out the wall he had built by himself and the slender ferns he had planted.

When we left, more kisses on the cheek from Nathalie's mom, a strong handshake from Nathalie's dad, and little porcelain crèche figures – a drummer for Andrea, a shepherd for me – tucked safely in our pockets to remember them by.

Day 12, Thursday:

We skipped class yesterday and used the adjective "gorgeous" so many times it doesn't sound like a real word anymore. This morning, we hopped on *un bateau* that carried us across the water to Porquerolles, an island off the coast. Bright blue sky, same shimmering water, perfect green trees.

When we got off the boat, we were handed to the dock and walked with the masses towards the solid ground of the village. Even armed with Nathalie's precisely penned directions, we decided to just go. So we follow unofficial looking signs promising that *le moulin à vent* – the windmill – is up ahead. As we walk along the gravel, olive groves line the path: bountiful, dusty green, small, wise. It seems hard to think of olive trees in any other terms than the ancients.

The windmill stands watch over the entire island. When Andrea and I stand under it, we look to our right and see how much we have left to explore, so we go straight towards the other side, towards Fort Ste. Agathe, whose crumbling stones seem as wise as the olive trees. We poke around, stick our heads over walls and walk down ancient stairs. Then we see the beach.

We walk down switchback paths hurriedly, towards the market and what we hope is the beach. In the village, we buy some sort of sandwich and fresh looking peaches and apricots. And – again with the unofficial looking signs – we follow a path that looks like it may head towards our beach. Luckily, we guessed right, and we end up in a spot right before the sand curves. The water is clear, turquoise, beautiful. A breeze you can only feel by the water, that breeze cuts softly through metallic sunrays.

We eat lunch first. Maybe because of the extra bite of salt air I've never eaten anything that tasted so good. The sandwich? Amazing. The apricots? Wonderful.

But the peaches. The peaches. There are no words. Andrea and I laughed when we bit into them. They were that good. We debated going back to get more, but what if that ruined it? What if we could only have peaches that good once? And why had these peaches become our fixation when an entire sea was in front of us?

So, after gnawing the peaches down to the very pit, we started swimming. The water was so cold, our arms and shoulders exploded in goosebumps, but we kept going, swimming far enough out to stand on the sandbar, throw hands in the air and glory in something beyond awe.

Maybe the salt air altered something besides our taste buds. Our feet were scraped every time we walked in because of the sharp rocks. Our bouts with goosebumps were practically violent. We were running out of sunscreen. Standing on the sandbar, though, shivering and joyous, Andrea declared, "I live a perfect, cold life."

On Porquerolles, truer words were never spoken.

Day 14, Saturday:

We're packed. Suitcases are in the hallway downstairs. Andrea's made sandwiches, hoping to come close to the perfection of the Porquerolles sandwiches. We've packed part of another baguette, too. Just plain. We've decided that we have to savor this one.

Just this morning, we were at the beach again. We had a quiet picnic, all of us wanting to think more than chatter, *je pense*. With Thierry's expertise, Andrea and I take off with snorkel gear, looking at the seagrass that Thierry told us is the lungs of the entire ocean, at little slippery fish, at massive red rocks. We swam farther away from shore than we probably should have, maybe hoping to escape from the inevitability of the train headed towards Paris too soon.

We've started to begin sentences with "Remember when..." and "When we come back someday..." because it makes it more real. Makes it less the idyll it's become in our journals and more of what we lived everyday for two weeks. *How are we supposed to leave now?* We ask ourselves. *We were just getting started.*

Maybe, though, we don't ever have to leave. Maybe, a little piece of us, not physically of course, but mentally – emotionally, even – can be stuck with the salt marshes and flamingos. In the cobblestoned, graffiti dusted, moped-wide streets. On the ends of baguettes. In kisses on the cheek. On the Porquerolles sandbar.

In falling in love with France.

Anticipation

It's Valentine's Day and we're pressed against the metal fence in front of the stage, talking to the blond security guard. He explains that he basically gets paid to watch concerts and pull people up if they faint from excitement and too-straight legs. His favorite concert, lately at least, has been one by a Led Zeppelin tribute band. Or something. We strain our ears, and still can't quite understand. Eventually, we just nod and say "cool," because it's a noncommittal phrase and we know he'll understand.

Before the concert, people-watching is at its best. We notice that the girl behind us, who keeps apologizing for being pushed against us, bears a striking resemblance to a drunk brunette at the last concert who pushed her weight into the back of our knees in order to get to the front, sprinkling obscenities along the way. And we see that the boy with the lip ring leaning next to Hannah is hitting on her, and she goes seamlessly along with it, smiling. And, we note that the tallest boy in the crowd has a weirdly vacant face, dark eyes too gloomy for his pale coloring, but covetable, model-esque cheekbones.

Anticipation hangs heavier than the stale swirls of cigarette smoke above our heads. Finally, the opening bands – one, two, three of them -- hit the stage in rapid succession. They all come in, jump around, pound their feet on the stage: guitarists brooding, bassists mellow, drummers insane, and singers flying to every corner of the platform. The opening bands were fine; everyone put on a good show. But the anticipation was still building – growing and growing and growing.

After the openers, our security guard moves so the number of security guards can be increased to four. Now, our guy is a tan, pokerfaced man who won't even glance at us. We talk amongst ourselves, our bodies pushed closer together than is comfortable. My shoulders no longer fit between Andrea and the other girl next to me, so I'm

turned at an awkward angle.

There's a wave in the crowd and the girl behind us apologizes again, while her friend determinedly pushes, it seems, everyone back to their rightful positions in a synchronized motion. There's a swell of shrieking younger girls who push Cheekbone-Guy out of his spot. He looks frustrated, trying to push his way through again, but his eyes are still unnervingly empty.

As Cheekbone-Guy blinks (and it seems that he's finally given up), the lights dim, and everyone screams, arms shooting towards the ceiling. I feel like the ultimate teenage cliché, and I love it. The stage has been transformed into a single guy's living room: flea market rugs, cool lighting, a Corona bottle lava lamp. The only thing different was the black grand piano – shiny as patent leather - parked solidly in the middle of the stage. The band walks on, smiling as if they'd just shared an inside joke, but they're excited to see us, too.

They go to their places. The lead singer, Andrew, hops on to his stool and starts pounding away at the keys, then springs back up, like the seat is way too hot. No one stops cheering the entire song, and they revel in it. They introduce themselves: "Hey St. Louis, we're Jack's Mannequin." The crowd drowns out his voice with cheers. He sings a few other songs. "Happy Valentine's Day. It's a Hallmark holiday, but what the fuck? It's a holiday about feeling good, and it feels good to feel good." He croons something else. "Um...this song's in honor of Valentine's day. It's a song about love...and some other shit." The crowd laughs in a rough unison. Their music and their energy infect the whole room. Even when the smell of too many bodies and cigarette smoke finally takes over, no one seems to care. Everyone keeps jumping.

When Andrew stage dives, gasps blossom into shrieks as he sails above our heads. People push powerfully just to be able to proclaim "Hell yeah, I touched him!" to envious friends. My friends and I just missed him.

Next time, we'll be ready.

How It Is

Inspired by Sonja Livingston's "The Ghetto Girls' Guide to Dating and Romance"

CAST: Allie Meg Natalie Ben Paul

Empty stage. Five boxes are set up. As each person first talks, they are illuminated. When they're finished, they freeze. They can move, but not out of the light. They can stand up, sit down. They do what comes naturally as they speak to the audience.

NATALIE: You know how it is. You turn in the mirror. Look for signs of change. Signs of something more than a ruler straight line.

MEG: Thing is, though, that you won't see it happening. Won't see the bends, the pulling in, the swelling.

BEN: We'll see it, though.

ALLIE: They will tell you when it happens.

PAUL: We'll give compliments the way we can.

MEG: The ones that are older than your dad give you those low, eerie whistles and the younger ones hum a mmmhmm. You should just keep your eyes down.

PAUL: For you, I'll come up with something new.

BEN: If you looked up, you may catch me gazing.

ALLIE: In a strange sort of way, it's interesting to listen to those men on break, outside of the fish market, smoking, calling out to girls and women. Mostly girls.

BEN: When they're younger, they care more about people looking. It's as new to them as it is to us.

PAUL: You got to learn to whistle by the time you learn how to shave.

MEG: Their voices are jungles at night.

BEN: Some make their voices low as Eve's apple on the branch.

PAUL: There's no disguising what we do, but we can pretend to be mysterious.

NATALIE: You don't think you mind being called baby, sugar, honey.

BEN: You are sweet.

ALLIE: But you must mind.

NATALIE: You should.

MEG: So you forget the smell of them. The slow glow of the cigarettes. How hot it was outside.

ALLIE: You think of all the fish they've handled, imagine the slimy film of silvery scales.

ALL GIRLS: Keep walking.

BOTH BOYS: Eyes down.

PAUL: If anything, I hide behind the smoke. Behind the way the heat makes the air tremble.

BEN: You should know that you can make me a little breathless.

Beat.

NATALIE: But then you'll lift your eyes up.

MEG: Because why not? You're curious. They're not that bad looking. They could be nice. You could just smile at them.

PAUL: And it's such a smile...

ALLIE: Yes, it's possible. So you grin a slow grin. Blink your eyes slowly. You know you've got long lashes.

BEN: Long, long lashes.

ALL GIRLS: But they say *come here, sweet thing*.

NATALIE: And you better bolt the other way. Those eyelashes will get you in trouble.

MEG: And you wander over. You say hey, bat your lashes. Hey.

PAUL: When she says *hey* back, I pretend to be unimpressed.

ALLIE: And you keep on walking. Slowly though. Eyelashes down. You sway more than walk.

BEN: Forget looks. That sway could kill.

MEG: And he says, *You okay, baby?* You nod. He clasps your hand. You turn up your face to him.

PAUL: I say *you okay, baby?* as gentle as I can. I pull your fingers into mine. You look at me.

ALLIE: But just be careful. Because he may say only for a minute and that may be true, but he certainly won't have a watch. But then he'll say just a minute longer and the time won't matter.

BEN: Time doesn't seem quite right when you're standing so close.

PAUL: It speeds up. Or stops completely.

MEG: Minutes don't exist anyway.

NATALIE: You learn to bring your girlfriends with you when you walk to the store. It's better that way.

PAUL: Better? That's true.

ALLIE: That way, when you walk, saunter, march, meander, past the men at the fish market, you can talk about anything but those ones staring at you from their porches or from behind their glowy cigarettes.

BEN: Anyway you walk, you look good.

MEG: Yes, get your friends to go with you.

ALLIE: They won't want to.

NATALIE: But they'll go. They'll need you later. For the same reason.

PAUL: Come on, now. I don't mean any harm.

MEG: So talk about anything but them. School. Clothes. That new CD.

ALLIE: Pretend they don't exist.

PAUL: If we think you're pretty, don't you want to know?

BEN: I wish there was a better way to tell you that you're beautiful.

NATALIE: If you have to, pretend you hate them.

PAUL: Not you, too...

ALL: [Only girls] Them and their [boys join in] rainforest voices...

Beat.

NATALIE: They're not all bad, though.

BEN: I promise.

MEG: There's that one that give you roses...

BEN: Tell me your favorite color?

MEG: The one who says that your eyes are better than stained glass, that your skin is like milk.

ALLIE: Or like café au lait.

PAUL: Or coffee.

NATALIE: Even though you could have him, even though you deserve him,

MEG: You may want to go back to the other one.

ALLIE: But you shouldn't. Don't lend money. Don't give them gifts.

ALL: Don't fall in love.

NATALIE: At least, not with him.

ALLIE AND PAUL: His [Your] heart's a sponge.

MEG AND BEN: Your [My] heart could be all liquid.

ALLIE: And you could give and give and give. And get nothing back.

NATALIE: So, no, not for that one.

MEG: But for the one that buys you flowers. The one that said that thing about your eyes

ALLIE: About your skin.

BEN: Maybe the one that actually talks to you.

PAUL: The one that doesn't wolf whistle.

NATALIE: He's the one that wants you to meet his family. He wants you to meet his mother, his brother, his aunt coming in from New York.

MEG: It may feel strange. After the slow glow cigarette smokers and the ones that say *hey baby, mmmhmmm*.

BEN: It feels strange for us, too, though. To catch your attention.

PAUL: To catch it, at least, in another way.

NATALIE: After the ones that you put on mascara for and the ones that you wear that white sweater for.

ALLIE: The one that you wait for at that one spot, counting cars as minutes roll by.

PAUL: I didn't think you'd show up, anyway.

MEG: Hope is worse than a pebble in the shoe.

BEN: But hopelessness is worse than that.

ALLIE: The ones that say *Yes, I'll take care of you*. That is.

ALL GIRLS: The prettiest of poisons.

NATALIE: Don't be Juliet.

MEG: Turn from Romeo.

PAUL: What else was I supposed to say?

ALLIE: Gaze again at the boy who wants you to meet his family.

BEN: I'll introduce you, if that's all it takes.

NATALIE: To be wanted like that isn't familiar.

PAUL: I'm still learning how to want you like that.

ALLIE: Maybe, to you, it doesn't seem normal.

BEN: Try to let it be?

MEG: It's like tasting a spice you've never tasted. But

ALL GIRLS: Don't spit him out.

BOTH BOYS: Not yet.

ALLIE: You should know that what you had before was bitter. You may not have realized it.

MEG: So realize it now.

NATALIE: *turns to MEG* Love your eyelashes.

ALLIE: *turns to NATALIE* Love that white sweater.

MEG: *turns to ALLIE* Love your skin.

BEN: So we can love you.

PAUL: So we can love us.

ALLIE: See if you want the boy who writes you letters,

BEN: Using Romeo words and none of his actions,

MEG: Who says your eyes are like stained glass:

NATALIE: See if you want him to love them too.

ALLIE: Just forget the voices like the jungle at night.

MEG: You could have a boy, now, that says he wants to

PAUL: Give you roses.

ALLIE: A boy that wants to introduce you to his mother.

BEN: To my family.

NATALIE: A boy who deserves you.

Beat.

ALL: Maybe.

Autumn

1.

Fall murmurs death, but you know that.

Balloons from summer hang
tangled in the skeleton trees,
noose-like,
the ghost of my breath
disappears skyward,
and the leaves seem
far too dead, too fragile
to have once been part
of something mighty.

2.

If anything, you thrive on it.

You feel so alive in the midst
of the lifelessness, you worry
that it's wrong.
I can only say I don't know
either. That perhaps
we never will.
You assure me there shouldn't
be an answer for everything;
the best we can
do is wonder.

3.

In wonder, then, I will join you.

I will kick up the leaves
for you and watch
the wind catch them. I
will exhale billows
of air and see them swirl
with yours.
The skeleton trees will be
nothing but sharp silhouettes
in the sudden dusk.

4.

Maybe, I will love the fall as you do.

Following, then, the echo
of your insisting voice,
I walk hunch-backed
under gaunt branches.
It is for you I breathe
the smoky ripeness
of decaying leaves, for you
I exhale it in a solitary cloud.