

Words Without Borders

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[Jean Phillippe Toussaint](#) from *Self-Portrait Abroad*
Translated from the [French](#) by [Edward Gauvin](#)

To my wife and children I dedicate these pages of Corsica (to my teammate go my thanks).

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: This slender collection consists of glimpses, less essays than reminiscences, of places Jean-Philippe Toussaint has traveled, often for readings or as the literary member in a group of French cultural emissaries. These locales, which include Kyoto, Hanoi, Prague, and Berlin, among others, serve as occasions for the author to sketch eccentricities in both his setting and himself. Of these locations perhaps the least immediately foreign, and closest to home, is Corsica, where this excerpt takes place. What surfaces from a closer reading of this chapter turn out to be hallmarks of the author: an unexpected economy of construction, dissimulated by the fussy and rambling accretion of detail, and a tenderness towards life's mundanities most apparent in moments of descriptive reverie. Here in his island home, as in a hammock, the habitually ironic native son relaxes, relinquishing his gossipy sarcasm for the milder, even lethargic voice of the vacationer. That these uneventful triumphs, the almost banal idyll, sincerely delight the urbane world traveler and prodigal cosmopolite most likely point to where the author, who now lives in Brussels, keeps his heart. The depth of this affinity is conveyed in a characteristic lightness of style. A small parade around the village square ends the piece, celebrating the author's victory. The parochial scene seems, in a trick of light and golden dust, almost to pass instantaneously into immemorial summer perfection, earning the reminiscence's parenthetical subtitle: "the best day of my life."

Cap Corse (The Best Day of My Life)

The day had begun in quite an innocuous way. We were waiting on a few friends for lunch that Wednesday, the tenth of August (the date is now forever graven in my memory), and we had already set the table up in the garden, in the shade of a large white canvas umbrella. While she waited, Madeleine, who was varnishing the shutters, wandered in her bathing suit along the front of the house, pensive, her Fongexor sealer in a bowl and a brush in her hand, in search of that perfect finishing touch to be made, here or there, to the shutters (or to the wooden table, to a chair leg, to the umbrella shaft, everything was fair game for her and her Fongexor; gentlemen, mind your pricks). Just as I was returning to the house after a dip by the rocks, carefree, my hands in the pockets of Bermuda shorts flaring broadly from my thighs, I spotted a flyer tacked to the spotted trunk of a plane tree rising from the roundabout at the entrance to the village, an oblong white flyer that announced, in perfect inkjet letters (a font called New York, if I'm not mistaken), a tournament of *boules*. The tournament was to take place the same day in the

neighboring village of Tollare, in the middle of the afternoon, and it so happened that Ange Leccia, whom we awaited for lunch, was my official *boules* partner. Together with Ange, we made a little group of enlightened amateurs, focused on each point, fairly sparing with our boules, which we cast with care and circumspection after having closely studied the qualities of the court, to which we gave a few stiff kicks of the heel, the better to judge its spring and yield, before returning thoughtfully to the throwing circle to squat and point, or land a boule as close as possible to the jack, with great poise: a little team, lacking perhaps in skill and practice, perhaps even in limberness—we were after all no longer young; evidently lacking the panache of teams of inborn shooters; moreover, more stuck with than made for each other (for example, we were neither of us shooters; we both, unfortunately, pointed, squatting on the ground like little old men). In short, and to give an candid recap of our season to date, our circuit had taken us to the fairly challenging Muro, before being eliminated by a tourists, a pair of clumsy, lucky loafers on vacation, and canceling at the last moment our participation in the tournament at B., for personal reasons.

With lunch over, we were already in the middle of loading the *pétanque* boules into the trunk of the 4x4 when what I had initially taken for a pair of particularly cocky Italian tourists parked their Vespa right in front of the yard, almost where we were standing. Toward the rear of the moped, whose exhaust continued to sputter and to expel toward our legs a foul and paltry cloud of blackish smoke, perched a Japanese girl wearing a loose white tank top through which could be seen the bare curve of her breasts; a Japanese girl who, without seeming in the slightest inclined to dismount, continuing instead to perch in profile at the back of the bike with the air of an unidentified mythological creature (neither mermaid nor sea horse, but something in between: the upper half a Japanese maiden, the lower half moped), bore under her arm a bright yellow surfboard. Only the rather unusual presence of this Japanese girl on a moped allowed me to identify, a few seconds later, the driver of the moped when, descending from his vehicle, he calmly, thoughtfully, settled his Vespa on its kickstand and removed his sunglasses with a Hollywoodian gesture: Christian Pietrantonì. Outfitted in a flowered shirt, Bermuda shorts, and long, somewhat Austrian socks of spotted white wool drawn up to the knees (a garb that contrasted a tad with the austere gray suit and little round-rimmed glasses he'd worn when I had last seen him in Tokyo), he introduced us, effectively delaying our departure for the tournament, to Noriko, who had just alighted from the moped. I served them each a nicely chilled glass of rosé on the yard and, throughout the conversation, the very voluble Christian Pietrantonì, constantly pulling his Tyrolean socks up to the knee, leaned toward his companion to exchange a few words in Spanish—the only language common to them, as she had spent some years in Madrid (the same years, in fact, as myself, I learned to my surprise: *¡hombre, en el año noventa!* said she, *¡Yo también!*), while Christian Pietrantonì, in what doubtless had no direct connection to his excellent command of Castilian, had at the time held a job in London. Ange of course also knew Christian Pietrantonì; Ange knew everyone. I myself had known that when Ange's parents came to visit him in Tokyo (for Ange, too, had lived in Japan; "Really, these Corsicans do get around," the Japanese girl must have been thinking), Christian Pietrantonì, having been notified of this visit straightaway by who knows what informed source (doubtless Ange himself), had with the swiftness of the

predator and the considerateness of a Lithuanian cousin rushed to their hotel and served them as guide and companion, preceding them everywhere through the lanes of Shinjuku, in order to enlighten them about the country and to interrogate them, at his leisure, on the latest news from the village, the dishiest, most up-to-the-minute *putachji* from Centuri, or Morsiglia, or the hamlet of Minerviu. I glanced discreetly at the hour and, fearing a late arrival at the match, gave the signal to leave by suddenly, impetuously, clacking my two boules together in the manner of the great players, making Noriko jump in her seat (*¡Santo cielo!* she cried, placing a hand on her chest). We were off.

Taking our places in our various vehicles, we reached Tollare in a slow cortege, Christian Pietrantoni's little Vespa leading the way through the soundless, burning scrubland while the rest of us, the *boules* players, followed in Ange's 4x4, silent as the crew of a spaceflight with less than an hour before takeoff. Before us, winging about like a police escort, Christian Pietrantoni nimbly swung his bike from side to side, leaning into curves the better, lightly, to partner them, Noriko behind him, clutching in one hand her admirer's colorful shirt and in the other, carefully, her bright yellow surfboard like a pagan trophy she paraded from village to village to the everlasting glory of the ocean and its great waves (though the Mediterranean that day was calm as a lake; a few wavelets came to perish abjectly at the foot of the rocks). Once in Tollare, parked in the village's pocked and pebbly main lot, I headed for the beach to sign us up for the tournament. In a little shack surrounded by reeds and selling ice cream and cold beverages, a table had been set up under an umbrella where two fellows in shorts (the organizers) were taking registrations before going on to the drawing. Plunging my hand deep into the pocket of my shorts, I pulled out an ancient, wrinkled fifty-franc note from which sneered a wizened Voltaire, and gave our names to the organizers, who were satisfied with just our first names: Ange, Jean-Philippe, Jean-Michel (everyone knew that no one actually called Vilmouth Jean-Michel, but Jean-Luc instead; but no matter, I later smoothed over my error by explaining that I had used an alias so as not to blow his cover as a *boules* star when everyone saw how well he pointed). When it was finally time for the drawing-that immutable ritual with its little scraps of paper stirred about in a sailor's cap bearing the emblem of Pastis 51-fate named me the partner of a certain René. We made, it must be said, a somewhat lopsided team; it was difficult to imagine a more mismatched pair, a more morganatic couple. He was short, stocky, sturdily muscled, with a thin black mustache, red shorts, and worn slippers (and stripped to the waist, perhaps, capable-looking), the infallible shooter who hunted his opponent's boules. I was rangy, aristocratic (very Prince of Savoie, if I do say so), with the long, refined hands of the levelheaded pointer, pasty of leg (already, in my opinion, perfectly tanned) beside my partner, whose own were luxuriantly browned and bushy, my body a bit stooped by the weight of years and a mild hint of arrogance due to the daily exercise of irony. I wore a simple pair of shapeless swimming shorts and a sagging white cotton shirt, an old straw hat that fit me, so to speak, like a glove-a smart straw boater trimmed with a fine caramel ribbon that had to have belonged to my grandfather Lanskoronskis-and a pair of boat shoes such as might be sported only by rich and idle would-be sailors on the gangplanks of their yacht clubs (you have some idea of the stylish sight I was: they addressed me as Monsieur). After the first set, which we naturally won without difficulty, we returned to the shack to announce our quick victory to the organizers. The other games were still in

progress, though one had ended, it seemed, without a struggle: I saw Jean-Luc (masquerading still as Jean-Michel, three boules in disarray at his feet) leaning on a plastic chair on the terrace, his pants rolled up around his calves and his feet bare, surveying the distant sea. Well? I said. Thirteen-zero, he said, and idly he tossed into the ocean a pebble which too was lost, sinking slowly to the bottom of the sea a few strokes from Noriko, who paddled about, her surfboard wedged under her armpits, going with the water's flow and kicking her feet blithely behind her in the blue and hopelessly still sea.

Ange and I easily managed to reach the semifinals, and I must say that, seeing us so, simultaneously vying a few meters apart in the two semifinal sets of the tournament, each beside a different partner (who, for all his unfamiliarity, was certainly more familiar with the game), I believed we were headed straight for a fratricidal confrontation as a finale. My fears were for naught (and the reasons for Ange's failure in this contest are not mine here to explain). The finals found me squatting in the thrower's circle to point, my Panama hat on my head, my shoes covered in a fine coat of gritty dust, concentrating under the eyes of the small, attentive crowd that had gathered in the village square. My boule in hand, my stare intense, really concentrating quite hard, I gauged with my gaze the distance between my boule and the jack, giving myself such mental counsel as "Don't come up short." (for I have the tendency to come up short-in boules, mind you). Concentrating one more time on my *donnée*-the exact spot where my boule should land-slightly to the left of the slope's natural axis, mentally rehearsing one final time the boule's entire path, I finished by rising almost in slow motion in the circle and, in the same sweeping, synchronized movement, lifting my arm and releasing my boule, giving it one last little calculated spin of the wrist. It was short, shit, I saw it straight off. Go ahead, point one more, said René, violently clacking his boules together to calm his nerves (and to prevent himself, perhaps, from coming over and taking it out on me). I squatted in the circle again. From time to time, amid the crowd's murmurs that reached me indistinctly, I recognized a few more familiar cadences. *Yo qué el hubiera saccado*, said Noriko. *¿Cres que va a apuntar otra vez?* she added. *Callate*, warned Christian Pietrantonio, to keep her from distracting me, *lo vas a descentrar*. Failing as I was, in fact, to focus myself, I relinquished the idea of playing right away and straightened up again to go and examine one last time the spot I was aiming for, letting my *boule* fall vertically to the ground to test the court's resistance. Don't come up short, OK? said René. No, no, I see it now, I said, I see it. I returned to the circle and pointed (I was long, a hair long). Toward the end of the set, during the last round, with our opponents leading eleven to nine and the fate of the game still the most open of questions, the opportunity to shoot for the final four points all at once, by *carreau*, befell me. Gotta go for it, said René, gotta shoot, that's the name of the game. I was as much a pointer of lengthy deliberation as, generally, a shooter of instinct. I stepped into the circle and, without thinking, shot . . . knocking the opposing boule neatly from the spot my own then took. The perfect shooter's shot: a *carreau*. There was a momentary fluttering in the square: murmurs, rustlings, eyes rubbed in disbelief, a refusal of the math. Nine plus four: thirteen. Thirteen, we'd won the tournament (first place, a Corsican prosciutto, a *prizuttu*), a wave of commotion rose around me, I was surrounded, congratulated, my son jumped for joy, Madeleine ran to meet me, in her arms the baby Anna who, from sheer enthusiasm, spoke her first words ("Papa" or "*prizuttu*"; in all the uproar, no one was quite sure). I accepted

the grand prize, the Corsican ham, from the hands of the organizers. Moved, I took it with both hands and brought it to my lips before holding it out at arm's length to show the crowd, while all around me shots were fired into the air and the village bells began to peal. Then, passing my prizuttu to my partner, who kissed it in turn, brushing it with his mustache, and in the general jubilation, accompanied by Noriko who scampered alongside, asking an autograph for her board, we set off on a little procession of honor around the village square, followed by a few children and a limping dog.