

Around an overhanging limb of a great spreading oak clung another piece. Frayed, rotted, bleached, and frazzled—barely there—but spinning restlessly in the breeze. Myop laid down her flowers.

And the summer was over.

ALICE WALKER, IN LOVE AND TROUBLE in  
ALICE WALKER. THE COMPLETE STORIES  
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## WE DRINK THE WINE IN FRANCE

(Harriet)

*"Je bois, tu bois, il boit, nous buvons, vous buvez. . ."*

They are oddly like a drawing by Daumier. He, immediately perceived as Old; she, Youth with brown cheeks. His thin form—over which the double-breasted pinstripe appears to crack at the base of his spine—is bending over her. His profile is strained, flattened by its sallowness; unrelieved by quick brown eyes that twitch at one corner and heavy black eyebrows lightly frosted with white. There is a gray line of perspiration above his mouth, like an artificial moustache. His long fingers are busy arranging, pointing to the words on the paper on her desk.

She is down low, Her neck strains backward, bringing her



face up to his. She is a small, round-bosomed girl with tumbly hair pulled severely back except for bangs. Her eyes are like the lens of a camera. Now they click shut. Now they open and drink in the light. Something, a kind of light, comes from them and shines on the professor of French. He is suddenly amazed at the mixture of orange and brown that is her skin.

"*En France, nous buvons le vin!*" The force of his breath touches her. She draws in her own. It makes a gasping sound that shocks him. He springs upright. Something stiff, aghast, more like a Daumier than ever, about him. The girl is startled, wonders why he jumped back so fast. Thinks he does not want to mingle breaths with her. For a hot flurried moment she feels inferior.

The professor takes cover behind his desk. His eyes race over the other forms in the class. He wonders what they notice. They are even worse than adult foreigners; they are children. When they see him going to the post office underneath their windows they call their friends to come and look down on his balding head. In the classroom they watch him professionally, their brown eyes as wary as his own. The blue-eyed girl begs for, then rejects, kinship. With him. With them. Her skin is white as the ceiling. The brown and rose of the skins around her do not give her a chance to exhibit beauty. By the range of colors she is annihilated. For this he feels vaguely sorry for her. But it is a momentary pang. He is too aware of her misery ever to bring it up. Hearing the bell he turns from her. For a moment his eyes lock with those of the girl who never has her French. She is dreaming, has not heard the bell, is unaware. For a moment she drifts into his eyes, but the click comes and the eyes go blank. When she passes him at the door his heart flutters like old newspapers in a gutter disturbed by a falling gust of wind.

## 2

The professor goes by for his mail: it is a magazine and a letter from Mexico, where he will go as soon as summer comes. He can hardly wait to leave Mississippi for even greater sun. The surrounding beauty has crept up on him gradually since his arrival three years ago. He can no longer ignore it and it hurts him, terribly. In Mexico he will find an even slower-infecting beauty. When it becomes painful he will begin to explore countries even farther south. He has been chased across the world by the realization of beauty. He folds the letter, looks with horror at the narrow walls and low ceiling of the post office, rushes out into the bright sunshine.

## 3

*Harriet* is an ugly name. She wonders if it would sound better in French. She leans forward from the weight of six large and heavy books. She is not stupid, as the professor of French thinks. She is really rather bright. At least that is what her other teachers say. She will read every one of the thick books in her arms, and they are not books she is required to read. She is trying to feel the substance of what other people have learned. To digest it until it becomes like bread and sustains her. She is the hungriest girl in the school.

She sees the professor take out his mail; the letter, which he reads, and the magazine, which he sticks under his arm. While she scans the bulletin board noting dances to which she will not be asked the panic of his flight reaches her. She wonders if his letter was about someone who has died.



Later, in the car, her body is like a lump of something that only breathes. She feels her lover's hands, dry and young, rake up the impediments of her clothes. A thrust of one hand against her nipples, nearly right, then a squeeze that accomplishes nothing. She feels herself borne backward on the front seat of the car, the weight pressing her down, the movement anxious, selfish, pinning her, stabbing through. When it is over she is surprised she can sit up again, she had imagined herself impaled on the seat. Sitting up, looking out the window: "Yes, it was good"; she remembers not the movement knocking against her stomach but the completely correct account she has given the word *boire*. *Je bois, tu bois, il boit, nous buvons. . .*

They move back toward the campus, she feeling outside the car, far away from the hands that manipulate the wheel. They hurry. If the gate is locked she will have to climb over the wall. For this she could be expelled. The boy sweats, worried about their safety, the future he wants. She thinks climbing walls an inconvenience but the humiliation of failure is not quite real. The knot behind her ear where a policeman struck her two weeks before begins to throb. But they are not late. She walks the two blocks to the campus gate, passes the winking guard, smells the liquor on his breath as he sniffs after her. She wonders about this injustice, her confinement, tries to construe an abstract sentence on the subject in impeccable French.

The professor will have cottage cheese, a soft egg, a glass of milk and cream for his meal. He has an ulcer and must take care of it. He wonders if Mademoiselle Harriet has noticed how he belches and strokes his stomach. He really

must stop thinking of her. Must remember he is old. That death has had its hands on him. That his odor is of ashes while hers is of earth and sun.

As he eats his colorless meal he remembers the magazine. It opens to his own story; a story he wrote to make the new pain less than the old. It is a story about life in a concentration camp. The same camp that gobbled up his wife and daughter and made fertilizer from their bones. He recalls the Polish winter, cold and damp and in his memory always dark; the stiff movement of the long marches, bleeding feet. It is all in the story; seven years of starvation, freezing, death. The publishers have described his escape in sensational language. His survival, in their words, appears abnormal. He is a monster for not now pushing up plants in the backwoods of Poland. A criminal for crossing Europe unslaughtered; for turning up in France already knowing the language. For having had parents devoted to learning that in the end had not done them any good!

*The author is now Professor of French at a school for black girls in the Deep South.*

Outraged, the professor flings the acknowledgement of his existence across the room.

"*Mon Dieu, quelle femme!*" Harriet inspects her naked body in the glass. She imagines that the professor will climb up the fire escape outside her window, that he will creep smiling through the curtains, that she will reach out to him all naked and warm and he will bury his cold nose and lips in the hot flesh of her bare shoulder. Undressed (she imagines him first in long red underwear), he will lean over her on the bed, looking. Then into bed with her. They will lie, talking. For there is no hurry about him. He is old enough to know better. He strokes her neck below the ear and tells her of his life.



Explains the blue stenciled numbers she has seen peek from beneath his cuff—a cuff he is always adjusting. For she is ignorant of history. Her own as well as his. He must tell her why he put a tattoo there only to keep trying to hide it later. He must promise her he will not be embarrassed to remove his coat in class, especially on hot days when it is clear he is miserable. So much he must tell her . . . But now her body has completely warmed him. His body seems to melt, to flow about hers. His mouth, fuller, plays with her breasts, teasing the nipples, light as the touch of a feather. His hands find, discover, places on her back, her sides. She takes him inside herself, not wanting to make him young again, for she is already where he at old age finds himself.

A knock, harsh and resounding, announces bed check and the house mother. Harriet has time to slip into her nightgown and mumble "Yes, ma'am" before the gray-brown dream-dispelling face pokes rigidly into the room.

## 7

Once in bed the professor abandons himself. He thinks hungrily of his stupid pupil. He remembers her from the very first week of classes; her blurred, soft speech, which he found difficult to understand, her slow comprehension—far behind the nearly white girl with the blue eyes, who ate French sentences choppily, like a horse chopping grass—her strange brown eyes so sorrowful at her ignorance they seemed capable of moaning. She is younger than the grandchild he might have had—and more stupid, he adds. But he cannot think of her as a child. As young, yes. But not the other way. She brings the odor of Southern jails into class with her, and hundreds of aching, marching feet, and the hurtful sound of the freedom songs he has heard from the church, the wailing of souls destined for bloody eternities at the end of each completely maddened street.

Her speech, which he had thought untutored and ugly, becomes her; the sorrowful eyes have bruised him where they touched. He dreams himself into her songs. Cashes the check from the story and buys two tickets to Mexico, lies with her openly on the beaches, praises the soft roundness of her nose, the deep brown he imagines on her toes, bakes his body to bring them closer to one. All the love from his miserable life he heaps on her lap.

When he awakes from his dream sweat is on his forehead, where years ago black hair curled and fell. And he is crying, without any tears but sweat, and when he turns his face to the wall he is already planning the wording of his resignation and buying brochures for South America.

## 8

"*Nous buvons le vin*," Harriet practices before entering the class, before seeing him. But the lesson for the day has moved on. It is "*Nous ne buvons pas le vin*" that the professor forces her to repeat before hiding himself for the last time behind his desk.