

Randy Bates

On Bastille Day

I glimpsed you early this morning, striding past me in Montpellier on *Boulevard des Arceaux* toward the tiny *epicerie*—which my wife, son, and I like—that stands blocks away on *Rue Paul Rimbaud* between *Rue Circe* and *Rue Calypso*. You glanced my way but wouldn't have noticed me, a man older than your father, frost bearded yet dressed in running clothes like the American that I am.

I want nothing in this utterance in a foreign language other than to praise and, improbably, to reach you in words, a compact, not-beautiful French woman with a smudged Roman profile, brisk on your way, without jewels or make-up, your dark hair somehow gathered above the tan nape of your neck, your sheer skirt not matching its top, the two together disclosing only that your hips are vigorous, your chest small. What most took my eye were the swells of muscle between the backs of your knees and your slender ankles and how those muscles worked, tightening then relaxing, as you walked beyond me in your sturdy sandals . . . and a huge, shiny rolling thing and its shadow passed alongside the narrow sidewalk before lurching to a halt almost past the stoplight ahead because, I then realized, its driver had noticed you too.

I lost sight of you as I crossed the boulevard behind this object, an import from my dear homeland-in-denial, the only one like it I've seen in two weeks in your country, manufactured by the Chrysler Corporation, a testosterone fantasy called a Ram, its size and weight out of any needful relation to its use as burnished personal transportation. As I watched its driver watch you from his high advantage, I failed to resist a petty impulse to extend my distaste for what he

rode in to him—and failed to resist, too, letting the anxiety his truck and he stirred in me threaten my pleasure in so many things proportionate and trim that I admire in your France.

A book, *Paris to the Moon*, which I urged on young writers I've come to Montpellier to work with, was then, as it is now, much in my mind. Its American author Adam Gopnik argues that “What truly makes Paris beautiful is the intermingling of the monumental and the personal, the abstract and the footsore particular, it and you. . . , [and in the] passage from the big to the little [that] makes Paris beautiful . . . , you have to be prepared to be small—to live, to trudge, to have your head down in melancholy and then lift it up, sideways—to get it.” Although there was nothing monumental—certainly not the outsized Ram—in my observation of your surroundings this morning, I've seen abundant grandly artistic architecture and many monuments in this southern French city that may be your home. As you proceeded quickly beyond the idling vehicle, you moved along a high wall of stones that abuts the narrowing sidewalk almost all the way from there to *Rue Paul Rimbaud*. Thinking of that now, I think of Gopnik's criticism of much of the newer grandeur of his beloved Paris in comparison to some of its older icons:

The curious thing about all of Mitterand's *grand projets*—the Bastille Opera, the pyramid of the Louvre, above all, . . . [the National] library—is that though they are big, they don't *feel* big. . . . The[se] new *grand projets* don't feel big so much as claustrophobic and confusing and stifling—emotionally trivial, small. The *grand projets* of the . . . [nineteenth] century were either the biggest of their kind or else a kind unto themselves. The Eiffel Tower maintains its aura of height partly because it really *is* tall and big and partly because there is still nothing like it anywhere else. (The radio masts and post office towers and skyscrapers that have been built since and that in some ways resemble it really don't, since its form is uniquely feminine—not phallus into sky but skirt into bodice into long throat.) . . .

He adds that other grand projects of Eiffel's century, unlike Eiffel's, fail “because they lack . . . a

kind of confidence in the things they enclose. . . .” and that “What makes . . . [more recent artistic and cultural accomplishments such as jazz] matter is their ability not to be big but *to be small meaningfully*, to be little largely, to be grandly, or intensely, diminutive.”

Since the artistry in what we see and read influences us, what could be more natural than for Gopnik’s views and his own art to affect and mix with my sense of you? What I saw in you early this morning is particular and small, yet connected to something larger: my feeling—probably not unique with me, a person still not widely enough educated to have encountered it in someone else’s words—that French life is appealingly feminized; feminized but not feminine. When the light changed to go and the Ram inched past where you walked, then gunned away in a great waste of exhaust, the gesture had no visible effect on you and your vigorous, self-confident pace.

Thinking of you now, I think, too, of Delacroix’s grand romantic painting, “Liberty Leading the People,” which I saw for the second time in my life, other than in prints, two days ago in the *Louvre*: his white-gowned woman, a breast bared, striding at the forefront of a dark, revolutionary throng. I don’t mean to mythify, but that’s what came to mind as I watched you—free, equal, and, I imagine, a good sister— then your shadow, pass purposefully along the stones and out of sight toward the tiny *epicerie*, which my family and I like, on *Rue Paul Rimbaud* between *Circe* and *Calypso*.