

Abby Paige

The Undefended Border

Comment? How? *Qui?* Who? Who put this tongue in my mouth? Who says this is my tongue?

CROSSING. 1898. (PIERRE WILFRED BILODEAU)

When my brothers take me through town on my last afternoon everyone wants to know
how it is not to work soil like my father. The ground here is rocks and sawdust.
My eye wanders extraordinary child yellow aproned dress
We sit on the porch *chez les Corriveau*, her tiny hand absentmindedly on my knee as she
watches a thrush jerk here and there across the grass. She looks into my face, but
blankly, as though she is tying ribbons in her head. *Ma femme, elle sera.*
Her father, poor farmer, looks at her shoes when he promises her to me.
Maman wraps a chicken for me to take and we make the usual promises, to write or come
back. With the basket I board the train, peel an egg as *St-Lazare* becomes a knot
on the horizon. I never know exactly when crossing happens, only that somewhere *en route*
there turns into here. With every crossing I become
more foreign and less. I recognize the roofs of the mine and the mill, too rusted to reflect
sunlight. Home now, if this is that. *Mais ici sera toujours*
Là Bas Là Bas Là Bas

Here / there / the line / denies the mix of tongues in mouths. The first words in meme's

ear: The last before she left: *Faire dodo*. Do dodo. Sleep. She rowed off the river into

CROSSING. 1912. (JOSEPHINE CORRIVEAU BILODEAU)

Ma seour m'a dit que cet homme *this man* *this man I took* qu'il
a me choisi du berceau. *Do you take this man, the father asked, as though asking a question. Under*
the veil it looked like snow was falling, the lace obscuring his face, pious, hungry.
Then *his hands on my knees* *in the dark,*
leaves from the box elder embroidering the ceiling, this man's voice saying my name as he takes.
Le chemin de fer c'est un tremblement qu'ébranle la terre d'en haut, ou peut-être c'est
moi qui bringuebale comme un gond malade. Le feuillage, juste en
changement, feu mourant. Je ne sais pas comment savoir quand nous avons traversé
la frontière.
Je me demande si je le sentirai. Peut-être quand on le traverse
je disparaîtrai *dispar* *être*

sky. The water drifts across / the 45th parallel, smuggling / fishy cargo. My nationality

broke off, floats off the coast of my identity. No one speaks perfect English. No one

CROSSING. 2008. (ABIGAIL ELLEN PAIGE)

* Could the names of the poet be more Anglo than those of her great-grandparents?

The list of my belongings called a *Customs Form B4E Personal Effects Accounting Document*
is 5 pages long, one for each room in the house where I lived until today.

The agent initials each page without looking in or at the truck and thanks me
in English, handing back the passports, mine with its American eagle, my husband's with
a crest and a crown. Love is a crossing into
so I hang my hat on the night we met, when I crossed here four years ago, toward home
in a snowstorm. How did you meet him? the agent asked then; I lied, not wanting to say
on-line. When I crossed in, the snow, assaulting the windshield in the cavernous dark, was
a white kind of fireworks, its downward surrender unapologetically cold. Now we cross
out together, or in, into— Now
I am my language. T'as l'air d'une quebecoise, someone tells me in French class. Sauf
quand j'ouvre la bouche, I stammer and blush, my grandmother in my face if not
my mouth. My favorite French phrase these days je ne suis pas d'ici feels
not altogether true, but is how I ask forgiveness when asked for directions
on the streets of Montréal.

whose tongue ain't broke. *Combien?* How many? How many tongues can I imperfect?