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Fief and the Fortress of Youth Slang in Translation

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The genesis of this translation lies in my doctoral thesis, defended in November 2018, which seeks to make a case for the translation of youth slang appearing in fictional texts through a style that I tentatively termed “Global Youth Speak” (GYS). Through an exploration of issues related to the “real-life” production, fictional reproduction, and interlingual translation of this non-standard form of language, I proposed that sufficient similarities can be identified between the different varieties of English-language youth slang across the globe to warrant their use in the translation of fictional texts. Three years after testing this hypothesis by translating the contemporary French novel *Moi non* (Patrick Goujon, Gallimard 2003), translating an extract of David Lopez’s *Fief* for this paper has allowed me to test the use of GYS on another extended piece of literature.

Written by David Lopez and published by Seuil in 2017, *Fief* was met with wide critical acclaim. It was praised by Leila Slimani, who chaired the jury that awarded the novel the Prix Inter in 2018, and shortlisted for the prestigious Medecis and Renaudot prizes. The novel’s title can be translated as “kingdom” or “fortress”, and it presents the story of Jonas and his friends, a group of young men living between the city and the countryside. This hybrid space, their own peri-urban fortress, transcends the geographical to permeate the language of the text. Raw and immediate, the fictional recreation of their voice daringly and deliberately deviates from the norms of standard language of the “beau parler français” for which the French are so known. In this extract, taken from the middle of the novel, we see how the nature of the young men’s occupations, or games, shifts from creative and mischievous to idle and soporific.

Lopez presents his novel as “an attempt to answer the question of what we do when we do nothing”, and is eager to assert that the lives and lifestyles he chronicles should not be interpreted as a representation of a particular group of French youth (*France Inter* 2018)¹⁶. Rather, he believes that the questions raised in his book “have more to do with youth in general than with youth from these areas in particular” and that his novel could be written from almost anywhere, providing that we realize that “you don’t need to be from a peri-urban town to be 20 years old and feel lost” (*France Inter* 2018). This idea of universality, or at least of relatability and transferability, runs also through Patrick Goujon’s *Moi non*: both authors seemed to sense a need to write *from* a specific space rather than *about* that space, and both avoided including explicit markers of time or place in their novel that would anchor the story in one context. Their choices might be interpreted as a desire not to act as the spokespeople for a particular group of people and bolstered my own desire to develop an alternative approach to the translation of youth slang. This particularity of the two novels should not, however, restrict the applicability of GYS for the translation of other texts featuring youth slang.

Before further investigating the parameters of this global, or globalized, form of youth language that can be used in translation, it is helpful to define the concept of slang. For the sake of brevity, we can refer to the definition of slang proposed collectively in the 2014 book *Global English Slang: Methodologies and Perspectives*

¹⁶ Originally in French – all translations my own.

in which a number of specialists explore the traits and usage of different slangs from around the world. These scholars state that “slang is informal, non-technical language that often seems novel to the user and/or listener, and that challenges a social or linguistic norm” (Coleman 30). They go on to assert that it can “also imply complicity in value judgements and thus play a performative role in defining personal or group identity” (Coleman 30). Their attempt to reach consensus invites a reflection on the extent to which certain features of slang, in this case informality and novelty, allow speakers to address directly or indirectly ideas of alterity, belonging, and identity.

Since slang might be considered a non-standard variety of language (cf. Gadet 1996), we might refer to the words of Anthony Pym when reflecting on an appropriate method of translation. He states that “in order to say anything remotely intelligent about the translation of variety, we would have to know what varieties are doing in cultural products in the first place” (69). To know what these varieties “are doing”, we can seek clarification from Eric Partridge who proposes that slang is a means of expression serving a number of functions. In particular, he underlines that the use of slang can constitute an effort to increase the vivacity and wit of a speaker’s expression and to establish complicity between speakers who have the codes and keys to the language while excluding those who do not (4-5). It is also worthwhile to note that slang tends to deploy words in an unusual and often unexpected manner: although new slang words and expressions are often coined, they are usually variations of old words, either in terms of a change in form, or of a change in meaning (Eble 25). As such, slang might be seen as an inventive manipulation of existing language, and my approach to translating it follows this same logic since I seek to exploit in a creative manner the rhythmic and lively potential of the shared features that permeate the foundations of youth language.

GYS is articulated primarily through non-lexical means because it exploits colloquial constructions to form its skeleton. This tactic boils down to the quite simple explanation that colloquial speech is generally inclusive and therefore not limited to one place within the broader linguistic community. On a lexical level, I strove to avoid as far as possible words or expressions that are restricted to usage in one area of the Anglosphere or that have already dated or might date quickly, dipping instead into the well of global youth lexis by using words that may have originated in one place but that are now used by young people all over the world. In this way, I employ lexis common to most young people around the world, instead of sporadically selecting words from different slangs spoken in different sections of the Anglosphere. Additionally, GYS is inspired by the distinct rhythm and sound-based wordplay of rap lyrics (homophones, rhymes, assonance, consonance, alliteration etc.) (see in particular Bradley and DuBois 2010) which help to avoid attenuating the playful nature of slang.

To heighten the immediacy of the writing style in English, the supple sentences that I have crafted for the translation of *Fief* are peppered with markers of orality, including informal and sometimes vulgar lexical constructions (e.g. “pretty fucking heavy”, “ride like hell”), casual demonstrative adjectives or adverbial phrases (e.g. “this one time”, “some kid”), and compound words and general extenders that add emphasis or contribute to intensifying orality (e.g. “it was nice and everything”, “one hell of a”, “the whole ball-in-the-water thing”). These linguistic additions are complemented by omissions, since I also systematically dropped (subject) pronouns and auxiliary verbs where appropriate and made liberal use of contractions to create connected speech indicative of the speed of the characters’ speech. In terms of rhythm, I tended to digress from the punctuation trends present in the French text to instill in the English text a

stronger sense of orality and of “flow”, to adopt the term used to describe the combination of rhythm and rhyme used in rap lyrics. Such a flow seems to be communicated more convincingly in English when the abundance of commas and full stops used to emphasize accumulation and to set out a beat in the French structures is discarded in favour of the use of more “ands” and dashes in run-on sentences which express a sense of spontaneous speech. Elsewhere, I harnessed other features of rap lyrics by relying on sound to enhance the liveliness of the narration (e.g. “learned to loiter”, “slipping and sliding”, “high-rise guys”).

These choices made in the translation of *Fief* demonstrate the impossibility of translating orality without taking structural liberties: I aimed to establish techniques that would create a voice in English for the characters which was inherently casual in tone. This does not mean, however, that I departed considerably from the style or meaning of each word in each sentence. On the contrary, I sought as much harmony between the two texts as possible for each unit, but I kept in mind the ultimate goal of bringing the English text to life in such a way that the casual style of the source text could thrive in translation. My translation of *Fief*, much like my translation of *Moi non*, seeks to bring to the fore the importance of a creative and thoughtful approach to translating slang. Rather than resorting to equivalence or another of the strategies commonly employed to translate slang which bear the risk of flattening, displacing, and/or exoticizing the text, I believe that the translator of texts featuring slang is able to exploit aspects of the formation of this type of playful language common to all forms of youth slang. By adopting this approach, an engaging and appealing style of writing can be established in the translated text which is able to appear credible to audiences as the voice of (foreign) young people in a work of fiction. This is, at least, my goal, and I invite readers to consider the success of its execution in the translated lines that follow.

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Fief
By
David Lopez

Quand j'étais petit, le meilleur moment de l'année c'était les vacances de Noël. Parce qu'en hiver, pas tous les ans mais presque, la mare gelait, et il y avait de la neige. Et puis il y avait tout le monde au quartier, il n'y en avait pas qui portaient au ski ou je ne sais quoi. Du coup, on était tout le temps dehors.

On avait ce petit bosquet, mais pour nous c'était une forêt, avec son terrain de basket en ciment au milieu, sa table de ping-pong en pierre, sa poussière et ses arbres, tous espacés de quelques mètres. Il y avait aussi cette mare, avec ses roseaux, ses canards, ses grenouilles et ses perches arc-en-ciel.

Dans la forêt on jouait à tout. Foot, basket, vélo, roller, circuits de billes, bagarre. Chez nous, c'était tous les jours les jeux Olympiques. Moi j'étais là la plupart du temps, et souvent avec Untel et Lahuis. Du côté de la mare il y avait les pouilleux, ceux qui rentraient chez eux le soir avec les ongles noirs et le pantalon sale. Ixe et Sucré traînaient tout le temps là, et ils emmenaient Poto avec eux, qui était plus petit. On les appelait les maîtres de la mare, et ce n'était pas forcément pour leur rendre hommage. Ils ont passé leur enfance à pêcher et à fabriquer des arcs pour se défendre. Ils faisaient de rares incursions de notre côté, et souvent c'était pour nous glisser une grenouille dans le short. Ixe, surtout, faisait ça. Nous, on les dérangeait quand le ballon tombait dans l'eau. Ça nous obligeait à jeter des cailloux pour que les remous poussent la balle et la dirigent vers la rive.

Le terrain de basket avait ceci de particulier qu'il était disposé de manière à ce que l'un des deux paniers

Fortress
By
David Lopez
Translated by Tiffane Levick

When I was a kid, the best time of year was the Christmas break. Because in winter, not every year but pretty much, the pond would freeze over and it would snow. And plus everyone was home, nobody went on skiing trips or anything like that. So we were always outside.

We had this little grove, but for us it may as well've been a forest, with a cement basketball court in the middle and a stone ping-pong table, and dust and trees, all a few metres apart. There was a pond as well, with reeds and ducks and frogs and sunfish.

We played all kinds of games in that forest. Soccer, basketball, bike-riding, rollerblading, marbles, fighting. It was the Olympics every day for us. I spent most of my time there, usually with Untel and Lahuis. The slum kids spent their days over at the pond and went home every night with black fingernails and soiled jeans. Ixe and Sucré were always hanging around there and they'd take Poto with them – he was younger. We called them the Pond Kings, but not necessarily out of respect. They spent their childhood fishing and making bow and arrows to defend themselves with. The rare times they ventured over to our side it was usually to slip a frog down our shorts. Ixe especially used to do that. And we'd go over to their side to annoy them whenever our ball landed in the pond. When that happened we'd have to throw stones so that the water pushed the ball towards the shore.

The basketball court was set out in this weird way with one of the two hoops at the edge of the pond. If anyone

soit au bord de la mare. Le moindre tir raté finissait à la flotte. Pour pallier ce défaut, et pour contenter tout le monde, car nous étions parfois une vingtaine de gamins entre six et seize ans à traîner là, on jouait au creeks. On fait une file indienne devant le panier, et les deux premiers de la file ont un ballon. Celui qui est tout devant tire, et s'il réussit il donne le ballon à celui qui est en troisième, puis rejoint le bout de la file, et ça coulisse comme ça. On élimine celui qui nous précède si on marque avant lui. Ça fait pas mal courir, d'autant plus qu'on a le droit à autant de tirs qu'on veut, tant que celui de derrière ne nous a pas éliminé. Moi ça m'arrivait de shooter le ballon de celui qui me suivait pour l'empêcher de marquer avant moi, et même si ça a souvent donné lieu à des embrouilles on n'a jamais disqualifié personne pour ça.

Quand on jouait au foot, outre le ballon dans l'eau, le principal obstacle c'était les arbres. Alors oui, grâce à eux on avait des buts naturels, et l'un des deux avait son propre défenseur, immuable. Presque tous les arbres étaient des chênes, et celui-ci on l'appelait Maldini. Parfois, en jouant, on dribblait un, deux joueurs, avant de se faire tacler par un arbre. Le plus rageant, pour moi qui n'étais pas un dribbleur, c'était de délivrer une ouverture millimétrée vers l'attaquant que Maldini interceptait sans sourciller. Je l'ai beaucoup insulté, cet arbre.

Nos parents ont acheté ces maisons alors qu'elles n'étaient pas encore construites. De jeunes couples, avec des enfants en bas âge, et d'autres à venir. On s'est tous vus grandir. Moi j'ai tout été dans ce quartier : petit, moyen, grand. Quand j'étais petit, les

ever missed, even by a little, the ball ended up in the water. Sometimes there were around twenty of us kids hanging out there, all aged between six and sixteen, so we tried to make up for the shitty court design and make everyone happy by playing knockout. We'd line ourselves up in single file in front of the hoop, with the two kids at the front holding a ball. The very first one shoots and if he gets it in he gives the ball to the third kid, then runs to the back of the line, and so on and so forth. If you get the ball in before the kid in front of you does, he's out. All this makes you run a fair bit, especially since you can shoot as many times as you like so long as the kid behind you hasn't knocked you out of the game. Sometimes I'd shoot the ball instead of the kid after me to stop him from scoring a point and even though this led to trouble a few times no one ever got disqualified over it.

When we played soccer, apart from the whole ball-in-the-water thing, our biggest problem was the trees. Though they did give us natural goals, and one of them came with its own defender, solid as a rock. They were pretty much all oak trees and we called that one Maldini. Sometimes we'd dribble the ball around one or two of the guys we were playing with and then get tackled by the tree. I wasn't a dribbler so the thing that made me maddest was when I'd send an inch-perfect pass to the attacker and Maldini intercepted it without even batting an eyelid. I gave that tree its fair share of abuse.

Our parents bought these houses before they'd been built. Young couples with small kids and others to come. We all saw each other grow up. And I've been everything in this neighbourhood – little, big, in-between. When I was little the big kids had us for their games and we were

grands, pour jouer, ils nous avaient nous. On voulait à tout prix les impressionner et obtenir leurs faveurs. Je me souviens de ce jour où ils ont demandé à Ixe de foncer vers la mare avec son vélo et de freiner le plus près possible de l'eau. Je le revois freiner si fort qu'il en est éjecté par-dessus la bicyclette, la gueule la première dans la mare, vaseuse, et cette odeur quand il est sorti sous les rires de l'assistance, et plus particulièrement des grands, pliés, allongés par terre de rire. Et tous ces coups qu'on a pris, combien de balayettes, de claques sur la nuque, de coups de bâton. Et ces questions quand on approchait la puberté, pour savoir si on avait des poils, et si on avait déjà embrassé une fille, si on avait mis la langue. J'entends encore Coupole, le grand avec sa boule à Z qui nous mettait la misère au foot, me demander hey Jonas tu te branles le zizi la nuit ?, et tous les autres partir dans un grand fou rire, et moi tout honteux, parce que pas de poils, la langue ouais, une fois, mais pas de poils...

Là où c'était un peu moins drôle, c'était quand ils se mettaient en tête d'organiser un combat. Ils savaient trop bien qu'on était prêts à tout pour qu'ils nous respectent. On devait avoir dix, onze ans. Untel, Lahuiss et moi on se faisait un petit creeks avec d'autres gamins du quartier dont les frères Astaire. Amandine ma voisine et Kelly la grande sœur de Sucré faisaient des tours du lotissement en vélo avec les tout-petits, dont le petit frère d'Untel, qui lui n'avait pas de vélo et suivait les autres en leur courant après. Celui-là on l'imaginait marathonien jusqu'à ce qu'il soit en âge de fumer des gros spliffs. Il faisait beau. Les grands étaient assis sur le banc en bois près du terrain de basket, et commentaient la partie. De l'autre côté de la mare, Sucré et Ixe, torse nu short claquettes,

dead-set on impressing them, on winning their approval. I remember the day they told Ixe to ride like hell towards the pond and to brake as close as he could to the edge. I can picture him braking so hard he went flying forwards over the top of the handlebars and landed face-first in the muddy water, and what he smelt like when he came back out while everyone else stood around laughing, especially the big kids – they were doubled-over or lying on the ground laughing. And boy did we take a lot of blows – they'd trip us over, again and again, and slap us on the neck, hit us with sticks. And all their questions just before we hit puberty – if we'd grown hairs yet, if we'd kissed any girls, if we'd used tongue. I can still hear Coupole, the tall guy with his shaved head, who used to beat us mercilessly at soccer, asking me Hey Jonas do you play with your wee-wee at night? and everyone else bursting out laughing and me feeling all embarrassed because, no, there wasn't any hair down there – tongue, yeah, once, but no hair...

It was a little less fun when they got it in their heads to organize a fight. They knew all too well that we'd do anything to get them to respect us. We must've been about ten or eleven – Untel, Lahuiss and me, we were playing a little game of knockout with some of the other local kids, including the Astaire brothers. My neighbour Amandine and Sucré's big sister Kelly were giving the really little kids bike-rides around the residence, including Untel's little brother who didn't have a bike of his own and followed the others around, running behind them. Everyone thought that kid was going to be a marathon runner – until he started smoking joints, that is. The weather was nice. The big kids were sitting on the wooden bench near the basketball court, commentating the game. On the

mettaient à l'eau un petit bateau de leur confection, à base de polystyrène, dans le but de tester le lance-pierre qu'ils venaient de fabriquer. Suite à une partie endiablée j'avais battu Untel en finale, mais comme j'avais légèrement dévié son ballon du pied et que ça lui avait fait perdre du temps il contestait ma victoire. Il était un peu énervé, mais sans plus, en tout cas pas au point de vouloir se battre, même si on s'est dit des ferme ta gueule et des quoi qu'est-ce qu'y a. Coupole nous a demandé qui gagnerait si on se battait, et on s'est regardés, et moi je le sentais venir en vrai, mais Untel, vu qu'il venait de perdre au creeks, il n'était pas enclin à me céder le moindre pouce de terrain. Il a répondu que ce serait lui qui gagnerait, et puis Coupole s'est mis à me pousser, à me dire oh là là c'qu'il a dit ! Oh ça m'aurait pas plu !, et il continuait à me pousser pour m'énervé, et en fait c'est à lui que j'aurais dû balancer le ballon dans la gueule, sauf que c'est Untel qui se l'est pris, à bout portant, lancé fort, les deux mains par-dessus la tête, comme une touche au football, et bam. Et c'est lourd putain, un ballon de basket, personne ne veut se manger ça dans la face. Il a saigné du nez sur son polo Lacoste beaucoup trop grand qui avait appartenu à son frère, et il m'est rentré dedans direct. Ce jour-là il y a eu une ronde autour de nous et on a dû se battre pendant, je ne sais pas, au moins quinze minutes. Ça n'en finissait pas. Il y avait des pauses parfois, et on avait chacun un grand qui faisait office d'homme de coin. Lui il avait Max, le grand qui avait toujours une nouvelle paire de baskets, avec les bulles d'air et tout. Moi j'avais Coupole, et je me rappelle qu'il m'avait conseillé de le mordre. Le polo Lacoste ne servirait plus jamais, et ma lèvre inférieure ne reprendrait son apparence normale qu'une semaine plus tard. C'est le père de Sucré,

other side of the pond, Sucré and Ixe were bare-chested in shorts and sandals and putting a little boat they'd built out of polystyrene in the water because they wanted to test out the slingshot they'd just made. I'd beaten Untel in the final after a pretty wild game but since I'd knocked his ball out of the way a bit and made him lose time he was contesting my victory. He was kind of pissed off but not seriously or in any case not enough to want to fight me, even if we did exchange a few Shut ups and What's up what's your problems. Coupole asked us who'd win if we fought and I felt like it was really going to happen but not Untel – he'd just lost at knockout and so wasn't too keen on giving me any ground. He said he would, it'd be him, he'd win, and then Coupole started pushing me, started saying Oh oh oh did you hear that? Oh I wouldn't be happy with that! and kept pushing me trying to make me mad, and actually he's the one I should've thrown the ball at, right in his face, except that it was Untel who got hit with it point blank when I threw it, hard, with both hands above my head like a soccer throw-in, and Bam. And a basketball is pretty fucking heavy, nobody wants to take one of those to the face. His nose bled all over his hand-me-down Lacoste polo that was way too big for him and he wasted no time in letting me have it. That day there was a circle around us and we must've fought for, I don't know, fifteen minutes at least. It was never-ending. There were a few breaks and we each had a big kid to shadow us. His was Max, the tall kid who always had a new pair of fancy shoes with air bubbles. I had Coupole and I remember him telling me I should bite him. No one would ever be wearing that Lacoste polo again, and my lower lip wouldn't look normal again for a week. It ended up being Sucré's dad who broke it up –

interpellé par la clameur, qui avait pénétré l'arène pour séparer les combattants avant qu'il y en ait un qui tombe. On s'est tous fait crier dessus, très fort, il était pas content le père à Sucré. Les grands avaient détalé en le voyant sortir de son pavillon. Untel et moi, quelque part, on était frustrés que ça s'arrête. On aurait pu continuer des heures, jusqu'à ce que l'un d'entre nous y reste. Ça a spéculé les jours suivants. Les uns disaient qu'Untel avait gagné, les autres ne partageaient pas ce point de vue. Les grands voulaient monter une revanche, prendre des paris. On avait une semaine pour s'entraîner, avec chacun notre coach personnel, Max et Coupole s'étaient proposés spontanément. Le combat aurait lieu sur le terrain de basket à telle date. On ne l'a pas fait. Ça suffisait. On ne pouvait plus se battre, parce qu'on venait de devenir de vrais amis.

Quand j'étais petit, le meilleur moment de l'année c'était les vacances de la Toussaint. Parce qu'en automne il ne faisait pas trop froid, et puis il y avait tout le monde, il n'y en avait pas qui partaient chez une tante ou je ne sais quoi. Du coup, on était tout le temps dehors.

Les chênes avaient perdu leurs feuilles, et nous les avions là à disposition, jonchant le sol, dans l'attente qu'on invente quelque chose avec. Le premier réflexe qu'on avait, c'était d'en faire le plus gros tas possible et de se jeter dedans, parfois depuis une branche d'arbre. Et puis on avait de l'imagination. Le jour où on en a fait un circuit pour vélos, ça nous a coûté une journée et demie de travail. Chacun était allé chercher le balai de sa mère et se ferait engueuler en rentrant, mais on était parvenus à couvrir la quasi-totalité de la surface de la forêt, avec slaloms entre les arbres, chicanes et virages en u. C'est Lahuiss, avec son BMX, qui nous avait mis la branlée à

he came out into the arena after hearing all the clamour and split up the fighters before someone got hurt. Sucré's dad yelled at all of us, and it was loud – he really wasn't happy. The big kids took off when they saw him come out his front door. Untel and me were kind of frustrated that it stopped. We could've kept going for hours, until only one of us was left. There was a fair bit of speculation for a few days after. Some said Untel had won and others didn't think so. The big kids wanted to organize a rematch, take bets. We had a week to train for it, each of us with our own coach – Max and Coupole offered their services straight away. The fight would take place on the basketball court on a set date. We didn't go through with it. That was enough. We couldn't fight each other now – we'd just become real friends.

When I was a kid, the best time of year was the autumn break. Because it wasn't too cold yet and plus everyone was home – nobody had gone off to stay with their aunt or anything like that. So we were always outside.

The leaves had fallen off the oak trees and were scattered all over the ground, at our disposal, waiting for us to do something creative with them. Our first reflex was to make a huge pile and jump into it, sometimes from a tree branch. And we were pretty imaginative. The time we used them to make a circuit for our bikes cost us a day and a half's work. We all went to get our mother's broom, and got told off for it when we went home, but we managed to cover almost the entire forest floor with zig-zags between the trees and double bends and u-shaped turns. Lahuiss ripped us all to shreds with his BMX. He'd finished the circuit in less than a minute and a half – it was insane. I have to admit he was one hell

tous. Il avait bouclé le tour en moins d'une minute trente, c'était insensé. Faut dire que c'était un sacré pilote. Moi, je préférais les circuits de billes. Une partie de la forêt avait un sol de terre sablonneuse, on pouvait y tracer ce qu'on voulait. On se mettait à l'indienne et le premier de la file dessinait le circuit avec son pied, avançant comme s'il traînait la patte, et en le suivant les autres consolidaient le parcours. Chacun y allait de sa suggestion, tiens passe autour de cet arbre-là, non celui-là, voilà, et prends le virage sur la bosse là, il va être technique ce virage. Une fois le tracé terminé, on se dispersait chacun à un endroit du circuit pour monter un piège. Outre l'éternel trou recouvert par des brindilles par-dessus lesquelles on pose des feuilles de chêne séchées, moi j'aimais bien creuser un trou en dehors du circuit et fabriquer une bosse avec la terre récoltée, posée sur le tracé, juste avant un virage. C'était déjà difficile de passer la bosse, mais alors garder la bille dans le circuit après y être parvenu, c'était presque impossible. Et si on sortait du circuit on revenait où on était. L'art de faire du surplace et s'en amuser. On avait fini par caler un bout de bois en sortie de virage pour augmenter les chances de réussite, et même ça ce n'était pas évident, fallait bien doser son tir. Je me faisais souvent insulter à cause de ça. Mais une course de billes ça nous prenait la journée, facile. Et c'était tout ce qui comptait.

Toutes ces occupations, c'était bien joli, mais une fois qu'on avait assez d'effectifs, on passait aux choses sérieuses. Avec les feuilles était tombée des arbres durant l'automne une quantité astronomique de glands. Certains étaient craquelés, d'autres durs comme de la pierre. C'était ceux-là qu'on ramassait en priorité, après avoir déterminé les équipes. Un jour, et un peu contre mon gré, je me retrouvais

of a cyclist. I personally liked marble runs better. Part of the forest floor was sandy so we could draw whatever we wanted in it. We'd line up in single file and the first kid would start drawing the line with his foot, dragging it forwards, and the others walked behind him to tighten up the course. Everyone did what he suggested – Hey go around that tree, no, that one, yeah, that's it, and put a turn on that bump over there, it'll be a tricky one. Once we'd finished tracing it out, everyone went to a specific spot on the track to set up a trap. Aside from the perpetual hole covered with a layer of twigs and dried-out oak leaves, I liked digging holes outside of the track and using the dirt to build a little hill right on the track, just before the turn. It was already hard enough to get the marble over the bump but keeping it in the run afterwards was practically impossible. And if your marble left the run you had to go back to where you were before. It was an art: not getting anywhere and having fun doing it. We ended up wedging a bit of wood in the ground after the turn to increase our chances of success, and even with that it wasn't easy – you had to plan your throw carefully. I got a fair bit of abuse for that. But a marble run took us the whole day, easy. And that was all that mattered.

It was nice and everything to have all these things to keep us busy, but once there were enough troops we got into the serious stuff. A huge number of acorns had fallen out of the trees at the same time as all the leaves in autumn. Some of them were all cracked, others as hard as rock. Those were the ones we picked up first, after working out the teams. One day, a little

avec Sucré et Ixe tandis qu'Untel avait recruté Lahuiss plutôt que moi dans l'équipe qu'il formait avec les frères Astaire. Très vite, Ixe m'a emmené au pied d'arbres où les glands étaient particulièrement gros et durs. On va leur faire mal avec ça, que je l'entends encore me dire. On avait mis nos vêtements avec le plus de poches pour en stocker un maximum. J'ai constaté ce jour-là que Ixe avait toutes les qualités requises pour devenir un sniper. La précision de ses lancers, c'était diabolique. J'étais heureux d'être de son côté, les autres prenaient cher. Sucré, c'était le combattant, celui qui charge l'ennemi pour s'approcher au plus près et lui faire le plus mal possible, quitte à se prendre des glands en retour. Moi je restais le plus souvent caché derrière un arbre, essayant de privilégier l'attaque surprise. Je n'étais ni précis ni courageux, plutôt sournois. Mon plan c'était d'abord de ne pas me faire toucher. Déjà.

Quand on faisait une bataille de glands, je pensais toujours à nos parents qui, s'ils jetaient une oreille par la fenêtre, entendraient ces rires entremêlés de cris de douleur, qui se succédaient sans jamais prendre le pas sur l'autre, et dans lesquels tout résonnait d'une joie de passer sa colère sur des victimes consentantes.

Quand j'étais petit, le meilleur moment de l'année c'était les vacances de Noël. Parce qu'en hiver, pas tous les ans mais presque, la mare gelait, et il y avait de la neige. Et puis il y avait tout le monde au quartier, il n'y en avait pas qui partaient au ski ou je ne sais quoi. Du coup, on était tout le temps dehors.

Quand la mare gelait suffisamment pour qu'on puisse marcher dessus, on le vivait comme une extension de notre terrain de jeu, et l'occasion d'en inventer des nouveaux. Pratiquer la glissade, c'est une chose, mais se lancer des défis, ça rend le jeu

unwillingly, I ended up in a team with Sucré and Ixe – Untel had chosen Lahuiss over me for the team he'd made with the Astaire brothers. Ixe took me straight over to the trees with the biggest and hardest acorns at the bottom. These'll hurt, I can still hear him saying. We'd put on our clothes with the most pockets to be able to carry as many as possible. I realized that day that Ixe had all the necessary qualities to be a sniper. His shots were murderously accurate. I was happy to be on his side – the other kids paid dearly. Sucré was the fighter, the one who runs at the enemy to get as close as possible and hurt them as much as possible, even if it meant being hit by acorns thrown back at him. I mostly stayed hiding behind a tree, trying to focus on surprise attacks. I wasn't very accurate, or very brave either – more sneaky than anything else. Mostly my plan involved avoiding getting hit. For a start.

Whenever we had an acorn fight, I'd always think of our parents – if they listened out the window, they'd hear shrieks of laughter mixed with screams of pain. The sounds alternated without ever cancelling each other out and it all resonated with the joy of inflicting our anger onto willing victims.

When I was a kid, the best time of year was the Christmas break. Because in winter, not every year but pretty much, the pond would freeze over and it snowed. And plus everyone was home, nobody went away on any skiing trips or anything like that. So we were always outside.

When the pond froze enough for us to be able to walk on it, we'd treat it like another place to play games and an opportunity to invent new ones. Slipping and sliding was one thing but giving each other challenges made the game exciting. The most basic thing we

excitant. Le plus basique c'était de parvenir à s'élancer depuis le terrain de basket puis de glisser sur le dos jusqu'à l'autre rive. Ce n'était pas facile, il fallait prendre beaucoup d'élan, et surtout, mettre un sacré coup de rein au moment d'arriver sur la glace, pour espérer avoir assez de vitesse et atteindre l'autre côté. On en a entendu des crânes se fracasser contre la glace, des coccyx, des omoplates. Et on en a vu des mecs faire croire qu'ils n'avaient pas mal. On l'a tous fait, parce qu'on s'est tous fait mal. Lorsqu'il y avait de la neige en plus de la glace, on s'amusait à canarder le mec en train de glisser. J'ai dû lancer dans les trois cents boules de neige à chacun de mes potes. On riait donc on n'avait pas froid. Bien souvent j'ai eu l'impression que si je donnais un coup de poing à quelqu'un ma main tomberait en miettes, tellement elle était gelée. Mettre des gants c'était passer à côté du truc.

Nos petits à nous ils étaient trop petits, à l'exception de Poto, qui était seul dans sa tranche d'âge. Quand on avait dans les quatorze quinze ans, lui il en avait dix, et en dessous de lui c'était du cinq six sept ans. Si ç'avait été une baltringue il aurait fait l'attardé à traîner avec les petits. Mais lui non, il venait toujours vers nous, il voulait traîner avec les grands, pourtant il en a pris des balayettes, des claques derrière la tête, des manchettes-coups de tête. Exactement comme nos grands l'ont fait avec nous. Sauf que nous on était une ribambelle, alors que lui il était tout seul. Il a pris pour tout le monde. Cible privilégiée parce que unique. Il était bien pratique pour nous. Au moment de tester l'épaisseur de la glace sur la mare, on l'envoyait. Quitte à lui demander de sauter pour être sûr. Il l'a percée plus d'une fois. Et nous on rigolait.

did was try to throw ourselves forward from the basketball court then slide on our backs to the other side of the pond. It wasn't easy, you needed a running start and you really had to give a hell of a push when you landed on the ice – hopefully building up enough speed to get to the other side. So many guys smashed their heads or their tailbones or their shoulder blades against the ice. And so many of them acted as if it didn't hurt. All of us did, because all of us hurt ourselves. When there was snow as well as ice, we'd entertain ourselves by slinging snowballs at the sliding kid. I must've thrown around three hundred of them at each and every one of my buddies. We'd be laughing so much we didn't feel the cold. My hand was so freezing that I often got the impression that if I punched someone it might break into little bits. Wearing gloves would be missing out on all the fun.

Our little kids were too little, except for Poto, the only one in his age group. When we were about fourteen or fifteen, he was ten, and the rest of the younger kids were five or six or seven. If he'd wanted to take the easy option, he could've played the retard and stayed with the little kids. But not him, he always came to us, always wanted to hang out with the big kids – and yet he paid for it, got belted and battered and beaten for it. Exactly like what the big kids had done to us. Except that there was a full flock of us and only one of him. He took blows for everyone – was our number one target because he was our only target, which was quite handy for us. Whenever we wanted to see how thick the ice on the pond was, we'd send him out. Sometimes we'd get him to jump up and down on it just to be sure. He cracked the ice more than once. And we all laughed.

Adolescents, Ixe, Sucré et moi on était tout le temps fourrés ensemble. On ne se lâchait pas. En hiver on sortait le soir et on restait là, sur le banc près du terrain de basket, à fumer des joints et improviser du rap sur un vieux beatbox tout pourri. Bouger la tête et un peu les bras ça va deux minutes mais ça ne réchauffe pas son homme. On avait déjà commencé la boxe à l'époque, alors quelquefois dans la soirée on se faisait un petit shadow, un petit touche-épaules, comme ça histoire de se réchauffer. Et puis, forcément, il y a un moment où ça part en couilles et on s'empoigne par la doudoune, et je me suis même vu par terre, sur la route, avec Ixe qui veut me soumettre par étranglement, et moi qui lui dis que si je nique mon manteau mon père va me tuer. On n'avait plus froid après ça. J'ai déjà dû essuyer ma sueur avec mon bonnet.

Quand j'étais petit, le meilleur moment de l'année c'était les vacances d'été. Parce qu'il y avait les grenouilles qui chantaient, le soir, et parce qu'on n'était pas tous au quartier, il y en avait toujours qui partaient à la plage ou une connerie dans le genre. Pas moi. Vu qu'on était en sous-effectif, c'était là qu'on se rapprochait, qu'on passait plus de temps à deux, à trois, même si on galérait la plupart du temps. Mais quoi qu'il arrive, quelle que soit l'équipe, on était tout le temps dehors.

C'est l'été que j'ai appris à traîner le soir. Une fois, Ixe est arrivé en disant hey les gars, vous savez quoi, j'ai du shit. Il avait pris ça dans une boîte qu'il y avait dans la chambre de son grand frère, et ça nous faisait un peu flipper, parce que son grand-frère c'était un mec pas très commode. Il ne traînait pas chez nous, on le connaissait à peine, il était surtout fourré avec les mecs des Tours. On avait peur qu'il se fasse griller Ixe, mais très vite on avait

When we were teenagers, Ixe, Sucré, and me were always hanging out together. We never let each other out of our sight. In winter we'd go out at night and stay out, sitting on the bench next to the basketball court smoking joints and improvising rap lyrics with a shitty old beatbox. Moving your head and your arms around a bit is OK for a while but it doesn't do much to keep you warm. We'd start boxing by then so sometimes at some point in the evening we'd dabble in a little shadow-boxing, a little sparring, just a bit, trying to get warm. But then we always reach a point where things get messy and we grab each other by our winter jackets. I've even ended up on the ground, on the road, with Ixe trying to strangle me so he'd beat me and me telling him that if I fuck up my coat my dad'll kill me. After that we weren't cold anymore. I had to wipe the sweat of my face with my hat more than once.

When I was a kid, the best time of year was the summer break. Because there were frogs croaking at night and because not everyone was home – there was always some kid going off to the beach or something stupid like that. Not me. Given we were undermanned, that was when we got closest – when we spent more time together in twos or threes, even if we were mostly just wasting time. But whatever happened, whoever was in the team, we were always outside.

It was during the summer that I learned to loiter at night. This one time, Ixe showed up saying Hey guys, guess what, I've got hash. He'd taken it from a box in his older brother's bedroom which kind of freaked us out a bit since his brother wasn't exactly the most easy-going of guys. He never spent any time in our neighbourhood and we barely knew him – he was always with the high-rise guys. We were scared that Ixe'd get caught, but forgot all that

oublié tout ça et on s'apprêtait à fumer un joint pour la première fois ensemble. Au dire des uns et des autres, on avait tous déjà fumé, mais pour ma part ça s'était limité à tirer une latte. Mon père avait laissé son joint dans le cendrier et était parti faire une course. À peine il avait passé la porte d'entrée que je m'étais rué sur le joint et l'avais allumé pour le goûter. J'ai beaucoup toussé, c'était le feu dans ma tête. J'avais quatorze ans. Les mecs avaient décidé à l'unanimité que c'était à moi de rouler le joint parce que je devais avoir vu mon père le faire, et donc avoir quelques notions. La vérité c'est que je n'avais aucune foutue idée de comment on allait se démerder. J'ai le tout petit bout de shit dans la main, et Ixe dit qu'il faut le chauffer, alors je fais comme quand on a froid aux mains en hiver, je les joins puis souffle dedans où j'ai calé la croquette, mais Untel rigole et me dit que c'est avec le briquet qu'il faut chauffer le shit. Bah t'as qu'à le faire toi au lieu de casser les couilles, et c'est parti on s'embrouille. Tant bien que mal je finis par fabriquer un truc qu'aujourd'hui je ne fumerais pour rien au monde, mais à ce moment-là, putain, c'était le Graal qu'on tenait entre nos mains. Il y avait un adage qui disait qui roule boule, qui fournit suit. Rien que pour ça j'étais content d'avoir roulé, car le droit de l'allumer me revenait. La première latte me fait tirer une grimace irrépressible qui fait beaucoup rire Lahuiss. J'en tire une deuxième et vois autour de moi des mains qui s'approchent, vas-y c'est à moi, non c'est à moi, et je le donne à Ixe. On tirait deux lattes chacun et ça tournait, et il a pas fait long feu le joint, parce qu'on avait tous assez de vice pour se dire que deux lattes c'est une chose, mais la taille de ces lattes c'en est une autre. Untel tirait des taffes qui en faisaient trois à elles seules, et ça protestait de tous les côtés, vas-y Untel

pretty quickly and got geared up to smoke our first joint together. All of us said we'd smoked before but I personally had only ever had a puff. My dad'd left his joint in the ashtray and gone off to run an errand. He'd barely walked out the front door and already I was all over his joint, lighting it up to have a taste. I coughed a lot and my head felt like it was on fire. I was fourteen. The guys all agreed that I was the one who should roll the joint because I must've seen my old man do it and so know more or less what to do. The truth is I had no fucking idea how we were going to figure this out. I've got a tiny bit of hash in my hand and Ixe says it has to be warmed up so I clasp my hands together like in winter when they're cold and I blow into them where the clump of weed is, but Untel laughs and tells me that you have to heat it up with a lighter. Well why don't you do it, hey, instead of being such a little dick, and then things got messy. So much so that I ended up making something I sure as hell wouldn't consider smoking now. But back then it was like holding the Holy Grail in our hands. There was this saying: if you roll it you rule it, if you buy it you try it. Even just that made me happy I'd rolled it since it meant I could rule it, light it up. On the first drag I can't help screwing up my face and Lahuiss can't help laughing, a lot. I take a second and see hands coming at me, Come on it's my turn, No it's mine, and I give it to Ixe. We each took two puffs and passed it round and the joint didn't last all that long since we were all clever enough to know that two puffs was one thing but the length of those puff was another. Untel took puffs that were each the equivalent of three, and objections were yelled out from all angles – Come off it Untel you bastard. In the next half hour we laughed, a lot, sometimes so much so we ended up lying on the

t'es un bâtard. Dans la demi-heure qui a suivi on a beaucoup rigolé, beaucoup, parfois à s'en allonger par terre, et même en exagérant un petit peu, mais bon, on était heureux. On savait comment on allait occuper nos soirées désormais. C'en était fini de l'ennui. On tenait quelque chose. C'est Untel le premier qui en a vendu. Il y en avait tout le temps. Pour ses dix-huit ans on avait roulé un dix-huit feuilles, une batte le truc. Il fallait le tenir à deux mains, l'une au niveau du filtre et l'autre sous le foyer, sinon il penchait en avant et ça risquait de le casser. Quand on s'est mis à traîner non plus tous ensemble mais plutôt éparpillés, on pouvait toujours compter sur Untel. Avec Sucré et Ixe on achetait pour nous trois, et c'était Ixe qui gardait le morceau. Sucré et moi on lui faisait confiance, on savait qu'il allait pas en couper de petites lamelles et se les garder pour lui, parce qu'il avait ce truc de toujours penser pour le groupe. On avait tout en commun, shit, cigarettes, feuilles. Parfois je voulais fumer une clope et il refusait systématiquement. Il disait que c'était du gâchis, qu'elles ne devaient servir que pour les joints, parce qu'on n'avait pas d'argent, et c'était cher ces conneries-là. Quand j'insistais jusqu'à devenir carrément relou, il craquait, et on s'en fumait une à trois.

Et puis on s'est habitués. Ce n'était plus nos soirées qu'on passait à fumer, mais aussi nos journées. Nos nuits. Nos heures de cours. Peu à peu on n'avait plus un joint, mais trois, et puis est venu le temps où on a eu chacun le sien. Fumer n'était plus l'occupation, on fumait en se demandant ce qu'on allait bien pouvoir foutre. On n'était plus dehors. On s'est enfermés. On a opté pour d'autres jeux. Des jeux auxquels on peut jouer assis. On ne se lance plus de glands. On ne se lance plus de boules de neige. On ne se balance plus des ballons de

ground – playing it up a little, sure, but whatever, we were happy. We knew how we'd be spending our evenings from now on. That was the end of boredom for us. We had something. Untel was the first to start dealing. He always had a stash. For his eighteenth birthday we rolled an eighteen-leaf joint, a real beast of a thing. You had to use both hands to be able to hold it properly – one on the filter and the other on the rod, otherwise it'd tip forward and might break. When we stopped hanging out all together and became more scattered, we could always count on Untel. Sucré and Ixe and me bought enough for the three of us and Ixe held onto it. Sucré and I trusted him, we knew he wouldn't slice little bits off for himself, because he was always thinking of the group. We shared everything – hash, cigarettes, papers. Sometimes I wanted to smoke a cigarette and he'd always say no. He said it was a waste, that we should only use them for joints, because we had no money, and that shit was expensive. When I insisted so much that it became really fucking annoying, he'd cave, and we'd smoke one between the three of us.

And then it became a habit. We didn't just spend our evenings smoking, but our days too. Our nights. Our classes. Gradually we didn't just have one joint, but three, and then came the time when we each had our own. Smoking was no longer the activity – we'd smoke wondering what we might do afterwards. We weren't outside anymore. We locked ourselves up. We opted for other games – ones you can play sitting down. No more throwing acorns at each other. No more snowballs. No more basketballs in

basket dans la gueule. On ne se lance plus que des insultes. the face. The only thing we hit each other with now is insults.