

*At the End of the
Sidewalks*

Là où les trottoirs s'arrêtent

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TRANSLATED BY TRASK ROBERTS



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**AT THE END OF THE
SIDEWALKS**

To the off-kilter, to the idle,
to the misunderstood, I dedicate this book.

To those who –
because they were made to believe they weren't normal,
because they were afraid to be themselves,
because they stopped short of living –
ended their lives
(a crime against society).

AGE 17

Some time later he slept with his best friend Thomas, who had been silently and helplessly in love with him for months. Thomas took what Gabriel gave and dared not ask more. It was easier this way. He received the validation he had sought and avoided plunging into an internal abyss – a small victory, but a victory nonetheless. One should avoid sleeping with his best friend, serious misunderstandings always result. It was Gabriel's first time. Thomas' too. The distance between them did not grow out of inexperience and awkwardness. Those quickly dissipated in their newfound carnal intimacy – the legacy of childhood reveries. Rather, this distance grew out of an imbalance of emotional investment, one too great to be bridged by physical embrace.

Body of Angels,
Mathieu Riboulet

11 a.m. Clément is in his room jerking off to a picture of Louis.

Lole is over at Louis' lying face up on a single bed. Louis, lying face down on Lole, has spent forty-five minutes trying to get it up. It's beyond him.

Blue puts on a bit of background porn you'd swear he was in. He polishes off the coke from the glass tabletop.

Clément thinks about me when he touches himself.

Clément tries to not think about me when he comes.

It doesn't work.

I am here. My room. My mum's apartment. She's still asleep. My brother lives abroad. My sister too, but a different abroad.

And I am writing a novel about all of them. A little more about Clément than the others.

Clément asks me how it begins.

I tell him: with your death.

I'll start at the end.

Don't suppose you had anything to do with that? I say to Clément's father, gesturing to his son's body mashed into the sidewalk.

His son surrounded by broken glass. A fifth-floor window blown out by his shoulder. The full weight of his body close behind. He broke glass shattered glass over railing into void.

He died for me.

His father didn't see. I saw. I saw him
in freefall.

Clément died. A suicide by many hands.

Emptiness below his feet. He falls and nothing stops
him. Nothing stops his body. He doesn't scream he falls.
Into black earth he crashes.

In Marseille you deviate from the norm you die. In
Marseille domination is a blood sport played in the
street with a passing word or look.

I scour his father's face for a reaction. Finding none I
look to the pavement.

And I leave Marseille. After calling my brother to come
look after Mum, I go.

Now summer's ending.

So I start again once more from the beginning and try
to write a novel about Clément and the others, knowing
perfectly well it won't amount to anything very coherent.

I start down the street towards the high school, to prove
to my mother watching from our balcony I really am

going to school. When she loses sight of me, I turn left, making a U-turn towards a bus stop with service to anywhere else.

I stroll down streets strewn with garbage melting under the sun's merciless rays. Black plastic bags from gutted trash cans grey as they stretch and finally rip. The gulls tear with their beaks, bust open the bags, and plunge inside to scavenge a bite to fly away with.

Thirty minutes on bus 19 takes me to the *Calanques Blanches* stop. I walk a bit. I sit on the ground facing the blue.

Two guys pass by on a moped.

I wonder if I'm so attracted to straight guys just to deny my inner fag. An easy explanation, sure, but I'm sticking to it. At least it explains away my proclivities. I find that reassuring.

Masculinity. Virility. Whatever it is was carved out of me. In its place is scar tissue, fodder for judgement, rejection. These men in the street, in bar basements, red-blooded, scarless, fascinate me.

Such sun. Seagulls close in on me as though after a school of fish just below the water's surface.

My hands ache from pressing the hard ground.

I stand and move vaguely in the direction of the shore where the whole sea seems to lie. Waves rage against white rock, splashing me. Waves die on the rocks.

In the blue of the water I see roving eyes. In these eyes I see the sea.

Away from Clément I come untethered but I'm bound to escape him. I try distance but it doesn't agree with me. It's starting to affect my complexion.

I yearn for the spray of a few drops of the waves breaking against the rocks. To act as tears. To ebb in windsong.

I don't want to hurt any more.

The screeching of gulls brings me down from the clouds. On my phone I read: the high school says you're absent where are you?

I don't answer. She might find me, grab me by the collar like I'm a little kid, and toss me into a classroom.

For a few seconds I thought it wise to dive into the sea where it roils. Perhaps the deafening tumult would whisk it all away or together. Loud enough to no longer hear at all. Maybe it would shatter me and I'd have an excuse. I want a good reason for pity.

Desire never dies merely clots.

I leave the shore behind and get the bus in the other direction. I need to get back into town. I track down Clément outside the school doors so he can ask me over. His parents work long days and come home late in the evening. I go there, hoping he'll make me a snack, I'll eat, and I'll strip off his clothes. I undo the button on his black wool trousers. Slide them down, do the same to his boyish boxers, revealing once more his pale cheeks.

When he's asleep I slide in close to breathe the smell of his fingers.

Explanation for his black wool trousers.

In the afternoon, right after gym class, Clément and I have study hall together.

Clément sits two rows in front of me.

Despite the heat, Clément wears his black wool trousers, just like he does every Monday.

He knows.

He gets up to grab a sheet of paper and a pen.

The black wool hugs his hips and tight butt. The hem just above his ankle. At the end of the day you gently take them off careful not to rip them careful he can keep them and wear them as many times as possible before the end of the year. Monday afternoons are skin caked in morning's dried sweat are his body exhausted from gym class are his body become my body to drain to sap.

In his mind, Louis is on set. He pictures himself in one of those porns filmed in a fake dorm room with guys fresh out of high school.

In reality the actors are pushing thirty but completely shaved and a little starved they look much younger.

Louis tries to believe himself there, though he's still just in his room. He dropped a couple of tabs this afternoon and everything is becoming elemental, primary colors: red, blue, green, and hardly anything in between. A swish of his head daubs the air with streaks of the contents of the room and the posters taped to walls. Their wakes linger in his vision.

Like meteors in flight, he thinks.

No sooner thought than forgotten, he turns to open the window for air. He checks a drawer and finds too little to roll a joint.

On the night Louis cuts his moped's motor out front of the thousand-storey building there is no reprieve from the heat. There to pick up twenty grams but his usual dealer never shows. In prison or maybe a ditch.

From his window, Djamil sees Louis below, a round helmet under his arm. He recognises it: there's a Grindr profile with a picture of that helmet sitting in front of a mirror.

A quick comparison of what he sees outside with the grid on the screen is all it takes to confirm.

He tells his mum: I'm going out.

And out he goes.

You're *hotstraight08*, he says to Louis. I... recognised you. I recognised you from the picture.

hotstraight08 is his Grindr profile name.

Louis sees what's happening. Clear-eyed and headed. He puts on his helmet and straddles the moped. He taps the seat behind him – translation: c'mon hop on. And the stranger climbs on behind him and they head to a quieter spot where then, in the same configuration, one slides up behind the other.

Louis is blown away – he's never come so much. Covering the wild grass of the little neighbourhood park, it's truly quite something.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Baptiste Thery-Guilbert was born in 1999 in Marseille and was raised primarily by women. His schooling was chaotic, and his job security was practically non-existent. He escaped this by sheer luck. Romantically attracted to men, he gradually adapted to this new reality, particularly through writing, which allowed him to express all the violence inflicted upon him by societal norms. This is why intimacy, the unhappy aspects of modernity, repression, LGBTQ+ phobias and their brutality are the themes he delves into, seeking to extract a piece of truth. *At the End of the Sidewalks (Là où les trottoirs s'arrêtent)* was his second published novel, appearing in French in 2022, following *Pas Dire* (2021). In 2023 *Lésions* was published, considered a 'distorting mirror' sequel to *At the End of the Sidewalks*.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Trask Roberts is a writer, translator and teacher based in north-east Ohio, where he teaches in the French and translation programs at Kent State University. Prior to this position, he was a visiting scholar at the University of Paris. He regularly publishes essays on, and translations from, contemporary Francophone writers.