

## Letter to the Hamlet of Saint-Xist, la Tour-sur-Orb, Hérault, France

Dear hamlet of Saint-Xist,

Long ago, a man named Antoine left you and travelled for months before reaching the land where, hundreds of years later, I was born. Knowing that Antoine's blood is my blood, I have always yearned to see you, Saint-Xist, his birthplace. I needed to see what Antoine's eyes had seen, touched what he had touched. I wanted to know what he had left behind, and why he had done so. Why would he leave you, Saint-Xist? Why would he leave your Occitanie soil?

Red soil, pale yellow stone, donkeys braying near a stream, this is what greeted me when I reached you. I had for so long wanted to see your land, your stones, your soil, your plants and tall trees, the mountains that surround you.

It was early Spring when I visited you. Too moved to speak, I silently walked in your narrow streets, ascending towards an ancient red church. This church had already been standing for four hundred years when Antoine walked past it, leaving you forever. He was travelling to Montpellier, where some of his relatives lived. He then went North to Paris.

Antoine eventually boarded a tall ship in Saint-Malo and crossed the Atlantic. Did he know he was leaving you forever, never to see your red church again? Its forecourt is surrounded by a cemetery. Pale yellow sandstone slabs, headstones, and mausoleums occupy this living mossy space. I search out the names of my ancestors but find none. The graves are decorated with an abundance of small gifts, bibelots, and porcelain flowers. There is a shady stream nearby, and ruins of the earlier church, from the ancient wars. Saint-Xist, I have learned that before Antoine left you, there were eight religious wars fought on your grounds in a span of thirty years. It is hard to imagine you as the theatre of such strife.

After his Atlantic crossing, Antoine arrived as a soldier in a land that had been inhabited for thousands of years. It would be later be called Canada. Were there regrets? Did he, with time, understand that he had left a war zone only to reach a new one? Did he help displace the Wendat and Mi'kmaq people who lived where he landed? What did he know about them? In 1646, in the city of Québec, Antoine married Denise, who was thirteen years old, and became a gardener.

Saint-Xist, I resume my walk through your quiet streets. I only have a Sunday afternoon to spend within you. Your houses are built in a way that ensures almost nothing can be seen of your inhabitants' life. The walls, palisades, fences, and doors are built on the very edge of the street, masking everything. You are a secretive one, Saint-Xist, you have me walking between rows of walls.

I meet a young family walking with four donkeys. We say hello and linger around the donkeys on the edge of a field. The father says that they are happy to see visitors. They love to have visitors. I want to ask them if they know anyone with my family names, but I feel that I will burst into tears if I try to speak. My day is so solemn, and theirs, so light. I don't want to cry here now, Saint-Xist; I will need time.

I gather small stones to hold as I leave, some red, some yellow.

I will be back, Saint-Xist, I will return. I carry you within me still.

Carole Beaulieu de Montpellier