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Pétanque by Emmanuel Verot

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Randy Schwartz
Pétanque

Emmanuel Verot
Pétanque

Khenifra, Morocco, July 2002

A clay-red town, its skies crisscrossed by storks.
The sandlot is barely lit by the flickering streetlights.
We approach, they play on;
one of them goes to find us some chairs,
another gives us some tea...
They play well; I didn't dare join.

And then the *muezzin* broke into his piercing lament
of hope and mercy;
a big rug was quickly spread out,
and from a water bottle the hands and faces were purified.
I turned and I saw them, these players,
lined up in prayer, in the offering of their game,
in the communion of their lives.
I joined my hands together and cried.

Commentary

Emmanuel Verot is a high school mathematics teacher in Béziers, southern France. He writes poems from time to time as the occasion arises, but has never tried to publish his work. He was raised in Casablanca, Morocco, where he was born in 1952 to a family of French Huguenot heritage; his father was a music teacher from near Bordeaux, and his mother was from Pau. Verot grew up speaking both French and Arabic.

A small challenge in this translation was to clarify points that might puzzle an English reader unfamiliar with Morocco. For instance, I used “clay-red town” to translate Verot’s *ville rouge* (red town), a reference to the color of traditional dwellings in towns such as Khenifra that are “dug into” the red-mountain portion of the Middle Atlas.

Pétanque is a lawn-bowling game of southern France that was introduced to Morocco by French colonials. The game is familiar to many outside of France and Morocco, partly because it was immortalized in the stories of Marcel Pagnol; I decided to leave the title in French. For American readers, “sandlot” works well for *terrain vague*, literally “waste lot”; in Khenifra there is no grass, and the game is played instead on fields of bare dirt. I chose to echo the word “join,” which appears in the last line of each stanza and makes a point of contrast: as an outsider, the poet dares not join the game he sees being played before him, yet he feels an overpowering emotional tie to the men as they halt their game in prayer.