

Stepping foot onto French soil, I felt alien. My pants were half the length of everyone else's, my fanny pack was jingling with euros my mom gave me, and my bright orange suitcase looked like it could fit an entire person in its smallest compartment. A group of kids passed by, and I could almost hear them murmuring: *C'est un américain*. I was uneasy, intimidated by the world-renowned city of love, but above all nervous to speak French. I was certain that my accent was a jailable offense, and my only comfort was knowing that my listening comprehension would save me the pain of understanding the verdict. Just prior, while trying to buy a sandwich at *Carrefour*, I had been completely stumped by the cashier's strange name for the receipt. Expecting *reçu*, I couldn't place the vaguely familiar word he offered instead. "Oh," I thought as I left, after having asked the man three times to repeat himself. "*He said ticket.*" Even cognates were flying right over my head.

Slowly, I got acclimated to the Parisian air, along with the beautiful jumble of words that circulates through it. It wasn't easy. Recognizable words could disappear in a mist of *enchaînements* in the same way that breathable air could vanish into clouds of cigarette smoke. Yet beyond the challenge of French phonetics is the reward of a language which, when spoken well, flows as smoothly as the Seine. Being able to understand plays by Molière at *La Comédie Française* and Ionesco at *Le Théâtre de la Huchette* gave meaning to the years I'd dedicated to French literature. Of course, understanding French that you've seen written, revised, and footnoted is one thing. Conversational fluency came from outside of the classroom, from learning the hard way the difference between the pronunciation of *tout* and *tu*, *nous* and *nu*, *beaucoup* and... I could go on.

As the language started making more sense, so too did the city. I came to realize that the vice grip of skinny jean pockets is actually better security against pickpockets than a fanny pack,

although I still couldn't bring myself to wear them in ninety—sorry—thirty degree weather. Most importantly, I learned that Parisians truly are rooting for you to learn their language. Everywhere I went, people humored my mistakes and cheered on my efforts, dissolving the fears I'd taken into the program. Not only was I learning the language, I was learning to embrace the process, a life-long lesson I'll carry with me as I continue to practice. For that, and everything else they do to give myself and other students the opportunity to experience this beautiful language and culture, I want to thank the Philadelphia Alliance Française and the family of Marie-Louise Vermeiren Jackson. For me, this experience was the culmination of my French degree, and I couldn't ask for a better way to bridge these chapters of my life.