

KK KOZIK

Piet's Sake, 2015
Oil on linen, 51 x 63 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

PETER WORTSMAN

I am a French Irregular Verb

Life through
the lens of language

*Speak in French when you can't think
of the English for a thing . . .*

—Lewis Carroll,
Through the Looking-Glass

Forgotten is the pain of memorizing all those irregular French verbs, the torment of rounding the mouth just right and skewing the glottal apparatus so as to emit a fair approximation of the proper nasal inflections. The Gallic syllables are honey on my tongue, a mastered password that lets me pass, if not as a native, then as a presumed Luxembourger, French Swiss, or a Belgian, or perhaps an Alsatian, a useful trick for traveling incognito in these troubled times.

In my own private atlas of the heart, the Old World is divided down the middle by an imaginary Maginot Line, a border that, I readily admit, bears little, if any, relation to today's geopolitical reality, but that bisects Europe along a tenuous fault line riddled with psychic land mines along which the phantasms of inherited memory stand guard. While the European Union dropped its national borders, according to the Schengen Agreement of 1995, the dividing line on my internalized roadmap has a serrated edge that roughly runs along the Rhine.

On one side they speak German, a loaded language, burdened for me, as the son of German-speaking Jewish refugees, with contradictory associations, since it is both my mother tongue (the language I spoke with my mother) and the guttural grunt of asphyxiation. On the other side they speak *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity). The French have a sense of humor about their national slogan. I recently saw it parodied with a wink in graffiti spray painted on the side of an official government building as, "*Liberté, Égalité, Béyoncé.*" Simplistic though my distinction may be—and I am full well aware of the historic inconsistencies and discrepancies, of the vagaries of collaboration and resistance—in Germany my throat tightens and stomach twitches with apprehension, in France I breathe easy, eat well, and fall in love.

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In the harried but hopeful expression of every African street peddler of counterfeit Louis Vuitton handbags; inflated plastic flying saucers; creepy crawly, sticky-fingered little figurines that shimmy down windows and walls; and other innocuous knickknacks knocked off in China and hawked on the streets of Montmartre and the Parvis Notre-Dame, I see the face of my late, beloved father, who, as a young man, an illegal alien struggling to make ends