

2006

Going back

Marion Halligan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Halligan, Marion, Going back, *Kunapipi*, 28(2), 2006.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol28/iss2/15>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Going back

Abstract

Catherine hoped that the tinkling of the water fountain wasn't going to make her want to pee again. The restaurant was heavily decorated with the regional artefacts which went with its name, La Table de l'Aveyron. Wide-brimmed black velour hats hung on the walls, and there was a lot of black ironmongery in the form of clockwork spits and long handled basting funnels. There was a great deal of copper ware too, bowls, moulds, warming pans, jam basins, and those antique wall fountains made up of a cistern with a tap and a flattened bowl underneath.

MARION HALLIGAN

Going Back

Catherine hoped that the tinkling of the water fountain wasn't going to make her want to pee again. The restaurant was heavily decorated with the regional artefacts which went with its name, La Table de l'Aveyron. Wide-brimmed black velour hats hung on the walls, and there was a lot of black ironmongery in the form of clockwork spits and long handled basting funnels. There was a great deal of copper ware too, bowls, moulds, warming pans, jam basins, and those antique wall fountains made up of a cistern with a tap and a flattened bowl underneath. There used to be one of those in the waiting room of the doctor, a stone room, vaulted and groined, in the street that was once the moat of the castle above. His house was somehow built into the walls of the old town, and, as well as the copper fountain, kept polished to a mirror shine, there were faience plates, and on the door a knocker in the shape of a lady's beringed hand. As a child she had taken it for granted that all doctors' waiting rooms were like this; chilly, dim, stony caverns with glowing ancient copper on the walls.

The fountain in the restaurant was converted into an ornamental fountain; this was the diuretic water that trickled out of the tap, tinkled into the basin and then was pumped back into the reservoir. Round and round. Catherine had already been to pee once, down a crooked staircase and into a dim smelly lavatory, only one, with a man in it, standing at the urinal, who turned his head to look at her. When she went into the cubicle she couldn't find the light switch, and realised it was the old-fashioned system, where the light goes on when you latch the door, so there are seconds of blackness while you are getting it to work. She didn't think there were any of those in existence any more, not in Paris. Perhaps it was part of the regional décor.

I ordered for you, said André when she got back. I know what she likes, he smiled at his guest. A business colleague. Usually Cathérine was not present when André entertained his business colleagues, but he thought she'd like to meet this one since he came from the Avéyron too, from a little town called Meyrejouls. He was a lean rangy man, with small eyes looking out from a face like one of those natural carvings in the landscape that make up the Chaos of Montpellier, and strings of oiled hair combed over his bald head. One string had become detached and dangled down the side of his face like an earring; it was quite long and flapped languidly when he turned his head. Cathérine wondered how he couldn't notice it. André said he was very rich, and a nice man when you got to know him. Cathérine had been thinking about people being nice, lately, and had decided that mostly they weren't. She thought that this man, who was called Louis Prouzot, wasn't nice at all.

The first dish was a thrush pâté. It came on an oval platter with moss and a twiggy branch on which sat two tiny stuffed birds, their beady eyes regarding the other fates of their fellows. There were two intricate nests perched on the twigs, containing eggs as inedible as the birds. The pâté was a small round pat, and beside was its empty tin. Cathérine didn't think the provenance was much to boast about. The thrushes were a bit shabby; you wondered how often they had been carried out, once inquisitive heads cocked, to proclaim the authenticity of the delicacy offered. If she'd wanted to get out her glasses she could have picked up the tin and read just how much thrush was in it. Much more pig, she guessed. It could be soya bean protein, for all the sad little birds could proclaim otherwise.

André had ordered aligot. He was right, it was her favourite dish. But it wasn't a good one; the potatoes were dry, the cheese was not juicy enough — Cathérine took the metro across to the rue Moufflard market to buy the very fresh new Cantal cheese, before it had firmed up into its usual hard yellow self, to make her aligot — and there was hardly any garlic in it. She found it difficult to swallow.

The partridge wasn't very much better, an ancient bird, dry and stringy, which is of course quite the normal choice for this dish but it must not end up like this, and the cabbage tasting stewed to death. She was thinking how she could have cooked these dishes, and how delicious they would have been, when she heard Louis Prouzot say. Do you not think so, madame? And she had to beg his pardon, because she hadn't been listening.

I said, a Frenchman has two homes, the place where he is born, and Paris. Do you not agree, madame?

André was nodding, and she said yes, she supposed that was true, and then she thought, does that mean that nobody is born in Paris? But then André wasn't, and she wasn't. But Fanny was.

She couldn't get any more flesh off the partridge. She stopped listening to Louis Prouzot talking about the importance of rootedness in the French provinces to the French character. Instead she remembered a young woman called Henriette who'd lived in the next door flat when Fanny was a little girl. She'd told Cathérine how she'd gone to Isère to have her baby, so the child would be born in the country of her forefathers. And afterwards, she said, I took Claudine to my grandmother's grave and I talked to her. I said, grandmother, I am here with my new baby daughter Claudine. Do you know we are here? I would like your blessing, grandmother. Give me a sign. It was very quiet, the graveyard was nearly in the country, there were hayfields around and that buzzing still feeling of bees in the flowers. Give me a sign, grandmother, I said, and do you know! — here Henriette opened her eyes wide and looked solemn — do you know, two blue butterflies came and flew just above the grave, round and round in spirals. For minutes. I'd never seen blue butterflies in that place before. I knew it was my grandmother speaking to me. Claudine opened her eyes and held out her hands. To the blue butterflies the same colour as her eyes. I'm certain she understood. She won't know her great

grandmother but maybe one day she'll remember the blue butterflies she sent to bless the new baby in the family.

When André came home she told him the story. You don't believe all that about blue butterflies, do you, he said, and she said, no, not that, but maybe they should have had Fanny born in the country of her ancestors, and he scoffed: No, why ever would you? Leave the safety of Paris for god knows what sort of care in the south? No, he said, Fanny can belong there, without needing to be born there. And they did go back, most years, for their summer holidays, so Fanny was familiar with the Avéyron. Though it was to André's particular region they went, not hers, she hadn't been back for a long time. You go back to see people, she thought, not the place, and I have no people left.

Cathérine sometimes cooked the dishes of her country, not always, she read magazines and liked to keep up with new recipes. Cathérine's food always transports me to the Avéyron, said one guest, but she thought he was just saying that, it was the kind of flowery speech people thought suitable for such occasions. Though she knew that if she had been cooking this meal she would have got it right.

Louis Prouzot bullied André into another bottle of wine. Well, come, he said, this is an excellent drop, I see you agree with me, can't beat a good Cahors, I always drink it when I can, provided it's a good one, of course, and this is good, very good. He drained his glass and looked at it sadly. Such a melancholy sight, an empty glass, don't you think? To suppose that it's time to stop, that's it, finished.

When the waiter brought a new bottle Prouzot took his arm, pinching it above the elbow with his fingers. His hand was big and bony and pulled the young man's arm at an awkward angle from his body. And you, my lad, what about you? Do you come from the Avéyron too?

The waiter smiled. Well, it was a grimace, standing there with his arm pulled out from his body in that crab-claw grip. He shook his head. I come from Normandy, he said. He was a brown young man, with velvety dark hair and eyes. He tried to pull his arm away, but Prouzot's grip was strong, and he was hampered with the bottle and three fresh glasses he was carrying.

You must be a Celt, said Prouzot, and pushed his arm away.

Thank you, said André gently, swallowing the taste of wine the waiter poured, nodding, Excellent, excellent, thank you.

The dessert was a cake cooked on a spit, one of the famous old recipes of the region. She'd never made it. It involves a mechanical spit turning in front of an open fire, to which you fix a wooden cone made of wood, and then tie oiled paper around it with string. The fire needs a deflector so the heat is not too direct. The batter, resembling the batter for madeleines, is made of a kilo each of flour, of sugar, of butter; twenty-four eggs, rum, orange flower water. The spit turns, the cook ladles the batter, slowly, so it hangs off the cone in lacy folds, caught just before they fall and set in place by the heat; only a few drops slide into the pan below. The result is rather like a model of a Christmas tree, a conical cake with lacy frills of batter, cooked golden, crisp, creamy. It takes hours. It's

insanely laborious. Cathérine hasn't a fire, or a spit, or the faintest inclination. The variables need a lifetime's experience to get right — the heat of the fire, the speed of the spit, the thickness of the batter, the quantity ladled out. There are several shops in Rodez which sell real gâteau à la broche; if you want to eat it, that's where you go. Of course it is very expensive.

The cake at La Table de l'Avéyron is industrial. She wonders how you make it in a factory but you clearly can. It doesn't taste fresh and eggy but of artificial essences of vanilla and orange and rum, heated and chemical.

Louis Prouzot was talking about the cake he always ate, from a certain pastry shop in Rodez, on the square, just along from the cathedral; did they know it? Cathérine thought this probably meant he didn't think much of the gâteau à la broche either. Cathérine said that yes, she believed she had eaten those cakes, and very good they were. Though she had heard they were a nearly dead art, that quite soon it would not be possible to buy them anymore. Which would be a great pity, lost skills are always a pity.

The country's going downhill, said Prouzac. Has been ever since Vichy. Pity they didn't get a better run. Should never have let things fall into the hands of de Gaulle. The ruination of the state.

Cathérine said, Can we blame de Gaulle for the disappearance of cake-making skills in the provinces? Prouzot said that given the ideals of a Vichy inspired government — I understand of course, the Marshall could no longer be with us, but his heirs, his heirs — such skills would have been retained because they were valued. His statements hung in the air like gas from a fart, and the hosts had no response to dispel it. Cathérine could think of several but they were all too rude. André said, What about a digestif? A prune, perhaps? An Armagnac? Cathérine wanted to moan. Just when she thought the evening might be going to be over. But Prouzac said, no, better not, best be going, and she almost forgave him the rest of the meal. André called for the bill, which took hours to come, and hours to process, the fountain piddled interminably, but finally they were out in the cold spring night.

By the time they were going to bed she had indigestion. I don't know why we go out to eat bad food in bad company, she said.

It was supposed to be good, he said. I thought it would be pleasant to meet a fellow countryman. And you ought not to turn up your nose at the company; after all it is your bread and butter.

Are you sure it's not mouldy bread and rancid butter?

His money's quite wholesome. He might be a Pétainist but he's dead keen to buy in that new development. If you'd been listening you'd have known that.

He was probably a collaborator. Probably made his money by robbing deported Jews.

Are you mad, woman? He'd have barely been a baby when all that was happening.

In spirit I bet he was. And probably inherited it from his father. His roots are probably deep in collaborators' gold.

What's got into you tonight? Money's money. It's not dirty or clean. It's real, or it's not. I don't run checks on how my clients' grandfathers made their money. Only that their descendants have it.

Cathérine was looking in the dressing table drawer for Vichy pastilles, which she always swore by for indigestion. But we don't have to eat with them.

No. You don't.

Cathérine had not been born in the little town whose doctor's surgery was in the street that had once been a moat, in a house built into the fortifications of the city's walls. She had been born in a small place called la Canourgue, at the bottom of the steep road that winds up to the plateau where Veresac perches vigilant on its hill, surrounded by fields. La Canourgue is a town full of water. Once when she was a little girl her grandfather had taken her to see her cradle, as he called it. Little busy streams ran along the streets. Every house had its own bridge from the pavement to the road, and the air was full of the music of the water rushing.

When she was very small and the Occupation happening they moved up to the old city, to a house within the walls, in a small square. Most of the houses had barns underneath, where the sheep were kept at night. On one side of the square was a wooden door in a wall, that opened into an enormous cistern. It was built of stone and arched and stretched a long way, right under the castle as well. When you unlatched the door and stepped on to a little balcony cold fresh watery air flowed across your face. The house was tall, four storeys, with quite a grand stone staircase at the front and a turret at one side which her grandfather said meant it had once been the house of a nobleman. In the medieval era, that was. When she asked what that meant, he said, many hundreds of years ago. But the town is older than that, he said, older even than the Romans, though that is where the name comes from. Veresac: *ac*, he said, when you hear that syllable at the end of a word you know that it is Roman, it means camp. Such a good place for a fortification, no one can surprise you. Stand on top of the hill, you can see a cat creeping, far over the plain.

The house belonged to her grandparents. There were no sheep under it, her grandfather had been a schoolteacher, as her mother was. This is a proud city, the old man says, no one has been illiterate here for several centuries. Her father wasn't much there. Her mother sometimes talked to the grandmother about him. Often she seemed cross. Once she said, They are like boys playing games. Like boys, and not thinking how dangerous it is. When he was killed, her mother said, There, I told you, and tears ran down her cheeks, so many tears, they dropped on to the front of her apron and made it soaking wet. Cathérine put her arms around her mother and felt the wetness on her own cheeks.

It wasn't until the Occupation was over that the word Resistance was used, and the stories began to be told.

After she left school Cathérine went to Montpellier to live with a cousin who was married to a baker. Her mother would have liked her to be a teacher but she didn't want that, she did a business course. It was there that she met André who came from near Rodez. She was pregnant when they got married. She could not believe that so shameful a thing had happened to her, certainly could not talk about it. She told people they wanted to get married quickly, with no fuss, and her mother being a widow and never having much money did not mind. But shortly after the marriage she miscarried, and then several more times. Sometimes she imagined a priest saying these miscarriages were a punishment for the sin of conceiving out of wedlock but she did not believe that. She loved André and did not think that getting pregnant was ever a sin to be punished. Eventually Fanny was born, and the doctor said, no more children.

No one but André knew that Cathérine had been pregnant before her marriage. She felt rather clever, having got away with it. So many girls hadn't. And then she sometimes thought of telling people, her family — but it was too late for that now — or Fanny. But always decided that really it was a silly idea. She stuck with the narrative, which was certainly a truth: a number of miscarriages, misery, despair, then, such luck, Fanny.

Cathérine Picard. Née Delmas. A daughter. A wife. A mother. A grandmother? Who knows. She can define herself thus. It is not all there is but it is of value to her. Whereas André? A man. He makes his place in the world as himself, not in relation to others. Though the possibility is there.

The day after the dinner at la Table de l'Avéyron Fanny called in to visit. She stood at the sitting room window as she always did and looked down into the small square of formal garden. It was a simple maze of box hedges in rectangles, paths of reddish gravel, a towering wall covered in a pelt of ivy and another of stone. It never changes, said Fanny. Year after year, the hedges the same height, the gravel the same red.

The man in the bottom flat manicures it, said Cathérine.

Fanny knows the story of the garden. How, when the original mansion was being knocked down ready for André to build his apartments, he had been going to bulldoze the garden as well, but Cathérine said let's keep that little bit. Can't do that, said André. You know what that patch of land is worth? You'll beggar me with these fancy notions.

It's such a small scrap, said Cathérine. And think of the value the view of it will add to the apartments. The light. The air. Historical. And people will love looking down on it.

And so it was. People did. Including Fanny and Cathérine. Standing at the window, gazing down, letting their eyes follow the unmysterious maze, and feel comforted.

Cathérine made tea and put out a plate of the little cakes called nun's farts that Fanny was fond of. They sat at the dining room table. Fanny still looked a bit peaky and pale, even though it was a long time since her illness and the

departure of Charlotte. Every time her daughter came Cathérine wondered if she were pregnant, but she never asked. She believed that if Fanny were she would be incandescent, she would not be able to hide it, she would burst in and the news would overflow.

The teapot was a present from Fanny; it was Chinese, and fitted into a padded basket. André thought it was a funny object, but it was good for keeping hot the pale milkless tea they both liked. There were two little shallow cups to go with it.

I met a man from Meyrelure, said Cathérine.

Oh yes.

Your father invited him to dinner. In a restaurant, not at home. It wasn't very good.

Fanny asked about the restaurant, and the meal, so Cathérine had to describe all that, then she said: I went to Meyrelure once, when I was a little girl. My mother took me. My grandfather drove us there in his old claptrap of a car. It was just after the liberation. Cathérine paused. Fanny listened. We went to see some old ladies. They seemed old to me. I suppose they were younger than I am now. My mother called them aunts. They were some sort of cousin of my father's, several times removed, I think. My grandfather dropped us in this huge cobbled square, there was an obelisk in the middle of it, with rows of names. I remember we stood and looked at them, and I was reading them, and I said to my mother, Why are so many of them the same? Because there'd be lists of two or three or six, all of the same name. And she said, They aren't exactly, the family names are the same, but see, there are mostly different initials, they have different first names. They are all different people. They're brothers, or cousins, or maybe sons and fathers. The same family, not the same person.

It was a memorial, this obelisk, to the Great War, and here were the names of all the men from the village and the farms round about who'd been killed. There were heavy metal spikes around it, rusty, with a rusty chain making a fence. I remember staring up at it, and the blue sky behind it, these high rows of the names of men killed.

Round three sides of the square were narrow tall houses. They looked like old people, shaky on their invisible legs, leaning against one another for support; if one fell down they all would. In rusty black clothes. Not drunk, decrepit.

We walked up some steps to one of them. There was a knocker in the shape of a lady's hand, with a ring on it, and pinned above that, one of those lucky thistles you find in the fields, like the rays of a round yellow sun. An old woman came to the door and took us through a hall into a dark room with big looming furniture. I was a child, but not that small, I think it really was very big and gloomy furniture. There were thick lace curtains over the window and not much light came through it, though it was a bright day outside; you could see the light but it was shut outside.

Cathérine paused. Fanny waited.

There were two more old ladies, one was the other aunt and the third was a visitor, a neighbour. They brought a big brown jug of water, from their well, they

said, very sweet, and gave us glasses of that with raspberry vinegar in. They made the vinegar themselves, they said, they grew the raspberries and made the vinegar. The garden had been good to them in difficult times. There was a bowl of walnuts and the visitor cracked them, holding two together in the palms of her hands and squeezing. It's easy, she said, if you get the angle right. They grew those, too. The tree had been planted when the elder aunt was born, to be cut down and made into a chest of drawers for her wedding, to keep her trousseau in. That had never happened, the tree was still standing, producing excellent walnuts.

You remember this very well, mama.

Yes I do, don't I. The first aunt gave me an album of postcards to look at; she pulled up a chair in front of me and put it on that. Turn the pages carefully from the top right hand corner, she said. They were pale sepia photographs of places like Vichy, St Nectaire, where people went to take the waters. There were a lot of marvellous buildings, I thought they were palaces, with ladies in long frothy dresses, so I thought this was interesting, that they were princesses, and I stopped listening to my mother and the aunts. Then I heard my mother say in a very soft tight voice that I knew meant she was stopping herself crying, My husband was a hero. He died a hero's death.

One of the aunts said, We should have trusted the Marshall. He was the one to save us.

The visitor said, Ah, the Marshall. The hero of Verdun. He was the one betrayed. She was taking a gulp of the vinegar drink and started to say something about traitors but it came out in a kind of bray and the drink sputtered out. I wanted to laugh, you know how you do when you're a child, but I was frightened too. She spluttered and had to be hit on the back. Then I thought she looked like a witch, with her mouth open and no teeth, well maybe one at the side, and she was skinny and hunched in the back. Very thin. Everybody was thin, then. They all wore pinafores of that soft black cotton with tiny flowers on it, you can still see it in the market, sometimes.

The visitor stopped choking long enough to get out, The dear Marshall, and then spluttered again.

I could see my mother not saying anything, sitting with her mouth tight and her hands wrapped together and her eyes opened wide and hard so no tears could squeeze out. An aunt looked at her. Well, she said, of course we are sorry that Fleuret died. The other said, Very sad for you.

Then they offered more raspberry vinegar, so good in the hot weather. My mother said, No thank you. The aunt closed up the photograph album. My mother said we had to go. But it wasn't time for grandfather to come. We said goodbye, with kisses on musty old cheeks, and went down the steps and across the square. We walked past the obelisk and along the road through the village and looked at the sleeping fields yellow with the end of summer. My mother said, They are the widows of the Great War, widows though they never married. Living out their lives in the family homes, nursing their ageing parents, till they too died

and left them orphans. That obelisk, and the names on them, that's all that's left. Maybe no specific names, maybe no actual lovers, spoken, declared, no fiancés, intendeds, maybe not even that. So there is no person to remember, no name to mourn, just the lists of the men who might have been and the loss of the life they should have had. She sighed when she said that. We walked back down the dusty street, hot and empty. My mother said, The death of the village. That's written on the obelisk too. All the children never born.

When I looked sideways at her, I saw that tears were running down her face. I looked away, and held her hand tight. I was used to her overflowing in tears like that, after my father died.

Poor old things, she said. We can't blame them. I'm a widow, too, but at least I had a marriage.

Who's the Marshall, I asked.

Marshall Pétain. He was a hero in the Great War. But then, in the next one, he just gave in. Surrendered. So quickly, so quickly. He betrayed the French people.

I climbed over the chain and sat on the steps of the obelisk. But only for a minute. I could feel all those dead men silently waiting at my back. All the brothers and cousins and fathers and sons, the husbands and lovers and fiancés, all crowded on to a narrow knobbed pillar, and I couldn't bear it. I ran away to the edge of the road, watching for grandfather in his old car, hearing it churning along the sleepy lane of the road before I saw it.

Grandfather said, How were the old ladies, and mama said: Old. And poor. I think of that now, said Cathérine; old: they can't have been sixty. They were lean, and fit, as I remember, but they seemed so ancient.

Still the same, then, said grandfather.

Yes. Still grieving for the Marshall.

So many traitors, said grandfather. So many traitors.

There was a flock of sheep walking along the road and we had to crawl behind them. After a bit we stopped, and waited for them to turn off into a village. Was my father a traitor, I said. They both turned to me. Their eyes had gone large, they made me think of the dog with saucer eyes. He was a hero, they said, both at once, my mother in that angry voice she always had when my father was mentioned, my grandfather with ... I wondered if it was pride.

I'd like to go back, said Cathérine, now. Back to Veresac. I spent all my childhood there, and I've never been back since. See the plaque on the cliff beside the road where my father was shot. Go back to Meyrelure and look at the obelisk. The old ladies must be dead now, I suppose, or maybe not, maybe they're still going, they'd be in their nineties, probably look no older now than they did then.

Still serving raspberry vinegar in well water.

I thought it was rather nice. A treat.

Fanny poured more tea, still hot in its nest. Why don't I come with you? We could take the train. Hire a car when we get there. You've never told me about my grandfather, not really.

Thrush Pâté

*This recipe is from a book called, *Cent et Une Recettes de Cuisine Aveyronnaise*, which translates as *A Hundred and One Aveyronnaise Recipes*. I have eaten thrush pâté but I have never cooked it.*

You need a number of thrush. You entirely bone each bird, making a stock with the bones that you then add to a farce (the same word as forcemeat) of all the flesh except the suprêmes, the fillets, including the entrails, some lean pork and veal, with pepper, salt, four spices, a little duck or goose liver. The recipe says 'it also accepts some drops of Armagnac'. And truffles, if you wish. You wrap the suprêmes in the farce, put them in a tin and cook as usual. Thrush pâté seems mainly to be presented as a conserve in this manner.

The most prized thrushes are taken on the Causses, the plateau country of the Aveyron, where they have fed on juniper berries which perfume the flesh and are the reason for eating the innards. The birds are caught in a trap called a tindelle: a flat stone held up by an ingenious scaffolding of sticks, which let the stone fall at the least touch. It's suspended over a hole in the ground, in which are juniper berries to entice the bird in.

*You can also roast the bird, undrawn, for ten minutes, you then take out the entrails, chop them, spread them on toast and put the thrush on top, with some of the cooking juice. This is called *Grive rotie sur canapé*.*

Eating thrush may seem shocking to us, but in the Aveyron it was local, even peasant, and ecologically sound. And immensely labour intensive. Cathérine doubts the pâté she has eaten is delicately made in the manner of this recipe.