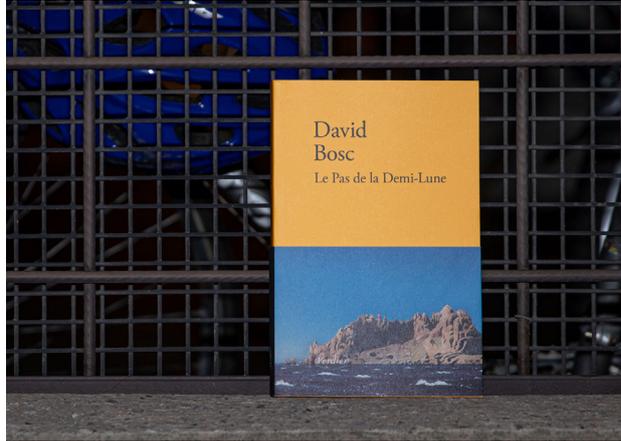


# The Half-Moon Step

David Bosc

Novel

French



*It's called Mahashima, though you probably know it as Marseille. Here, in this former capital of an unimportant kingdom, Ryoshū reflects on how lucky he is to live so joyfully in such a happy place. Then, one morning, he sets off to revisit the nearby landscapes of his childhood. As he walks along the shore and climbs the hills, he recalls the troubled times of his youth and the whim of power that marked the beginning of the best times ever known in Mahashima—the relocation of the capital. It happened quickly. The powers that be found somewhere else to flaunt their opulence and abandoned Mahashima, leaving the city and its surroundings to their fate...*

*"Nostalgia is unjust, like everything that preys violently on our hearts, and in my own heart, the little raft that I cobbled together as a child to take me across a sea of boredom and bitterness is as glorious as the splendid galleon of joy on which we've been sailing for the last few years. The city of Mahashima—my city, a city once so harsh—has become as gentle as an afternoon dream in its abandonment."*

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Photo: Wiktoria Bosc

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Excerpt translated by Imogen Taylor

The heavy night-time downpour subsided at dawn and the sky was large enough not to be the same all over. A blurry moon quivered on the horizon. It was very pale, the grey-blue of soapy water.

In the garden, the smell of green rose to meet the raindrops. Shākudo was sitting cross-legged in a wicker armchair, cradling a porcelain bowl in her hands. In front of her, the big banana leaves nodded slowly, like donkeys lowering their heads at a wall.

I joined Shākudo on the unrailed terrace, crouched down behind her and put my arms around her shoulders. Above us, the rust-stained tarpaulin began to shudder.

The moon is about to disappear behind the houses of Roche Blanche. In three days it will be full and, as always at full moon, I will go for a night walk. This time, though, instead of going down to the harbour and taking the dead-end road to Lesataka, I have decided to strike out south and head for the backlit purple hills, behind which lies Legūdo with its view of the sea. For some time, I have felt the urge to see Samena again and Mont Rose, the Cove of Madaraga beyond Pointe Rouge—all the bits of land and countryside that my childhood, deceitful like all childhoods, worked into an image of potential happiness just for me.

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I suppose it must be the increasing signs of an imminent change in the weather: I realise—and the realisation is

painful—what a beautiful time we have spent together, Shākudo and I and all the inhabitants of the former capital. Nothing in the dreams of my childhood, the hopes of my youth, or even the stories of the old—deceitful as they all are—prepared me for the fullness of the last few years. The beautiful season came, shining resplendent, changing people and colours.

When she feels my chin on her shoulder, Shākudo raises her hand to touch my cheek. *The moon together with the rain...* she murmurs. And as it's a poem we both like, I add: *Does heaven known anything more moving?*

We spend the morning assembling, folding and stitching the quires of a new children's book. The room where we work has a big mirror with tarnished silvering. In this changing square of sky and water, this upended winter pond, the shadows and shadows that have piled up over the years sometimes rise to the surface like mud.

Although the French windows are left open most of the day and night, there isn't a single fingerprint on the old rippled glass—not a speck of fly shit, not a trace of sweat or dust. I use as much white vinegar on them as it takes. The furniture and tiling do not reflect the same excessive degree of care. Strangely, I have an almost northern passion for freshly washed tiles.

Standing at the workbench, I shift my weight from one hip to the other. My thumb whitens as I press down on the bone folder that slides over the paper, breaking the fibres. Shākudo is sitting on a straw mat, head cocked to one side, back straight. Her hand rises, pulling the cream linen thread, comes back to make a stitch, rises again, forms the last loop, grabs the scissors from the lacquer tray. Her gestures are full of energy, but smooth and round—no sign of a struggle.

'Ryoshū? Are you coming to rinse my hair?'

I don't finish tying my parcel. It falls open again as I walk down the three steps and along the dark, winding

corridor to the bathroom where the light seeps in at a ventilator covered with leaves. Shākudo is squatting on the duckboards. I slip off my espadrilles, my eyes on her gleaming back and on the circle her hips make with her buttocks. I grab the wooden-handled jug. At first the water makes Shākudo's hair puff up, then the soap suds roll over it like sea foam. (I am moved.)

The weather has cleared completely, the sky is all blues and pinks, only a few wispy clouds in the distance.

Shākudo smokes her little cigar in the sun, standing on the doorstep with her legs crossed. With a jerk of her chin she invites me to look at what she's looking at: from the cracked saddle of my motorbike that I haven't ridden for years, a tomcat, eyes half-closed, is keeping watch over his harem and the joyful chaos of their offspring. Have all the cats had kittens at once? They tumble out from under the bench, through the open door of an empty house, from between the clumps of coarse grass on the pavement, from behind the water butt.

The street, which is a little wider than the buildings are tall—an appealing kind of street—is livening up nicely.

Although new people arrive every day, in small groups that have made it over the northern mountains, the former capital is still too big for the population, like the clothes of someone just out of hospital. But it's a garment that suits us, good cloth of a good weave, printed with a variety of patterns. Each street is its own world these days; there's no longer really a centre. We have more houses than we need. If people continue to rent rooms in Mahashima, it's because they're single and want to live with others in a household where someone will cook them dinner, provide them with firewood and bathwater, take care of their laundry and post—a tiny vestige of permanence in the great flux of things. All the nasty slums are empty. The blocks of flats in the north and east of the city have acquired the mineral patina of cliffs; they stand deserted in the searing air, as if at the bottom of a dead sea.

After the Days of Wrath demolitions, other buildings were torn down during off hours—because they were ugly, or simply to regain a view of the purple hills, or the sea, or a handsome tree that had been forgotten. In the streets, all the blocks and posts and bollards were ripped out and the billboards taken down; pedestrian subways and sections of tunnel were filled in. At the same time, though it was never discussed, most of the electric poles were left standing, with their bunches of little bells in porcelain or green glass, some stripped of their electric wires. These tall masts create some attractive verticals in the cityscape. (Here is a tree too tall for the tiny yard where it is growing; it spills out onto the road, defenestrating itself and all the birds that inhabit it, but there is no one at present, no service, to decide on behalf of the residents that it's a disturbance, a danger—that it needs cutting down. Everyone keeps an eye on it, prunes the branches that knock against the windowpanes, watches over the lumbering movements of this light-seeking giant.)