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TEENAGER: THIRTEEN

Neil Shepard

Old Orchard Beach, first beach
 down from the border, Quebec girls
 speak a tongue more foreign
 than the put-downs and come-
 ons of American girls.

Perched on the boardwalk,
 you listen to the bright lure
 of their words, your teeth sunk
 in candied apple, your tongue
 curled around a few French phrases:

Bonjour, Bonsoir, Bonne nuit, Je t'aime.

Their skimpy bikinis, atomic
 in impact, power the Ferris wheel
 in your blood hauling up hidden
 fish from the salt marshes, hidden

stink of flopped kisses, flubbed
 unbuttonings. This year you'll get your first
 wet kiss—but wait!—first
 cocked fist in your eye
 from a French girl whose name

you'll never know—you'll know
 her simply as "Elbows" for the tomboy
 swing of her arms as she beelines
 away from you, your one rehearsed line:
Voulez vous couchez avec moi sur la plage?

which probably sounds as garbled
as Marconi's invitation to the Queen
of England, 1902, via transatlantic cable,
to return his call. But you don't know that yet.
And that's the difference between

us. Benighted and ballsy at thirteen,
you're neurons and raw nerve, ganglia and gangly
indifference to risk. You're as close
to siren-singing as you'll ever be.
No wax in your ears

to block the electric
hum of the blood's dictation.
Whether a reefer on the beach
leads to enormous appetite
sated by French fries or French kisses,
you'll stuff your mouth with some
thing and feel good, if not lucky.
But why stop there? Tonight,
we're betting on saltwater kisses
and something steaming in your hand—

a wedge of pizza or hand-cut fries,
and a girl's hand warm in yours
as you move away from amusement
lights and begin the mouth-to-mouth
resuscitation of desire.