

# CORDUROY AGAINST NYLON

Marouane Bakhti's debut novel *Comment sortir du monde / How to Leave the World* is a tale of leaving behind adolescence and its assimilations; breaking out into the city but never shaking off the soil of your hometown. Lara Vergnaud's English translation came out this September, although the book has been well praised since it was published in its original French back in March. Nobel Laureate Annie Ernaux, one of the most influential figures in contemporary autofiction, called it "a rare book that depicts the isolation and poetry of rural life". *France Culture* lauded the novel's "language full of sound, colour, complicated words, a lyricism that is taken on to manage the simplicity of the everyday".

The book is an autobiographical narrative of both coming-out and of going up in the world. Bakhti is his own narrator; son of a Moroccan-immigrant father and a French mother, he navigates his feelings of alienation from his Muslim family as a gay man, as well as his departure from his rural home town of oak trees and sheep carcasses to live an educated metropolitan life in Paris. There is, strangely, a little something of Ernaux's *La Place* in *How To Leave The World*: the trepidation between feelings of guilt and liberation at leaving one's working-class background behind for the city and the university. But there is also the ennui once we get there: the sense of being alien as we wander the street, directionless.

Bakhti draws our attention towards clothing in varying forms—costume, uniform, religious dress—in a way which reflects a physical presentation of how we assimilate in different stages of coming-of-age. This is particularly remarkable in his descriptions of male groups, who seem always, in Bakhti's memory, to be dressed in "plastic clothes". It's often the boys which hound and holler at the narrator in his adolescence who so frequently don polyester apparel. The visual codes of masculine camaraderie evoke childhood memories of alienation from male togetherness: the football team that spit on his clothes, the boys on mopeds who intimidate his hometown.

The distinctions made between "synthetic shorts" and Bakhti's own "corduroy and khaki cotton" and the gandura which he fashions as a "strapless" dress are a subtle way of marking the novel's feeling of utter alienation from straight, macho and often white male communities. The autofictional "I" is an isolated and introspective creature, made even more so when a surrounding rural France is keeping you at arm's length. An army of exactly reproduced boys and men is terrifying and beguiling *à la fois*, even if their football kits risk going up in flames. Which they partially do, when Bakhti's father sets alight all his journals full of sketches of the faces and penises of the men he ends up sleeping with. This experience of being out of the ordinary doesn't just manifest in fear. Negative experiences with homogenised male groups root in the narrator as both trauma and desire. The men from Bakhti's adolescence, as well as his marked differences from them, inform both a discomfort and an attraction towards these violent forms of masculinity.

The narrative is chronologically disjointed; the bugs and leaves of his childhood blow into Bakhti's city wanderings and the present, adult voice speaks through past-tense reminiscence. The text is structured predominantly into two- or three-lined paragraphs which cut up the act of reading with small, reflective pauses. The pacing is slow and pensive. And when it isn't, mostly in the central event of the death of a loved one, grief can pour more convincingly from Bakhti's words, and the shortcomings of memory are pronounced in a manner that is all-too true to life.

Of course, a work in translation is its own individual creature. In discussion with the London Review Bookshop, Bakhti reflects on surrendering his poetic authority through the translation of his work into English. Vergnaud's work is lyrical and pervasive, and brilliantly delivers Bakhti's story to an Anglophone readership; still, in these structural pauses, we can access the rhythms of Bakhti's poetic, original French. *How to Leave the World* delivers anew the thoughtful meditations of *Comment sortir du monde*, remaining as faithful as possible to recreating the spaces Bakhti's narrator inhabits, and the eyes through which these worlds are seen.

by Romilly Schulte