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Philippe Rahmy  
BÉTON ARMÉ  
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Philippe Rahmy's *Béton armé* is remarkable. First of all, this lively travelogue offers unusual views of the "frenzied, opaque and incomprehensible world of Shanghai", where the Swiss francophone poet, video-poetry artist and rock-music songwriter (b. 1965) was invited to take up a two-month residency in 2011. Secondly, his narrative consists of provocative remarks about aesthetics, trenchant evocations of local cultural authorities, and incisive recollections of his childhood, his German mother and his Egyptian father. Rahmy suffers from brittle bone disease, and this trip—"I am more than forty years old," he states early on, "I have never travelled"—was taken against everyone's better judgment. Rahmy braves the crowds and buses of Shanghai, venturing along streets no tourist has seen. He vividly describes urban scenes, especially passers-by, all the while reflecting on the truthfulness of literary description. If the passages about his disease were removed from this book, it would be impossible to know that he had overcome countless dangers while doing his fieldwork.

Disease is intimately involved in Rahmy's travel writing because his Shanghai sojourn enables him to ponder his literary coming-of-age. He was "born as a writer", he admits, after an injection of animal stem cells, which was made by his physician-grandfather, nearly killed him and gave him a sense of being "half-child, half-animal". He then wrote graphic poetry and prose poetry about pain in *Mouvement par la fin* (2005) and *Demeure le corps* (2007), both of which have harrowing ontological resonance. Now he takes a new step: the drafting of prose engaging the particulars of the outside world. The title of his new book, which means "reinforced concrete", thus refers to the modern Chinese city, the buildings of which seem constructed after "the collapse of the notions of beauty, ugliness, good, evil" and in "proportions making one forget man's intervention in the works he creates". Rahmy reinforces himself through this defiant and inquisitive confrontation with Shanghai, even as he once fortified himself, while a boy, by listening to his mother reading from Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*, and suddenly stood up and walked for the first time. "I was Augustin Meaulnes", Rahmy recalls, "tall and mysterious on the threshold of life." Similarly, these sardonic, sharp-eyed pages are also about crossing essential thresholds in our short lifetimes.

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