

Untangling Threads:
The Translation of Marie H el ene Poitras's
Soudain le Minotaure

Maryse-Myl ene B elanger

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ABSTRACT

Untangling Threads: The Translation of Marie H el ene Poitras's *Soudain le Minotaure*

Maryse-Myl ene B elanger

Translation in the age of postmodernism can no longer be simply conceived as the reproduction of an original, but has become subject to the rewriting of an already pluralized original. Postmodernists gave awareness to the text by questioning whether it has any identifiable limits and borders. The text is conceptualized as an intertext, itself a translation, blurring the distinction of the original by carrying traces of other texts. It deconstructs the hierarchy between the original text and its versions, as well as reconfiguring the conception of authorship and originality, and thus, translation.

This thesis puts this theory to test by illustrating the translation of a postmodern text, *Soudain le Minotaure*, written by Marie H el ene Poitras, a young Qu eb ecoise whose artistic creativity is darkly alluring. It is a novel so rich in postmodern substance that a straightforward, linear, literal approach to its translation is virtually impossible. Poitras's novel interprets distinctively postmodern subjects: the author, intertextuality, the Other, language, realism, truth and society, which are examined in the first two sections of this thesis to support the translation. The third section examines the difficulties and challenges met during the translation of a postmodern text. The bulk of the thesis is the English translation of the first half of this remarkable novel, the newly titled *Suddenly the Minotaur*.

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DEDICATION

To my mother, Elsa Mercedes, for the unconditional love and support she has given me throughout the years.

The Myth of Ariadne from Ovid

*Minos reached harbour in the isle of Crete
And, disembarking, paid his vows to Jove,
A hundred bulls, and hung the spoils of war
To adorn his palace walls. His dynasty's
Disgrace had grown; the monstrous hybrid beast
Declared the queen's obscene adultery.
To rid his precincts of this shame the king
Planned to confine him shut away within
Blind walls of intricate complexity.
The structure was designed by Daedalus,
The famous architect. Appearances
Were all confused; he led the eye astray
By a mazy multitude of winding ways,
Just as Maeander plays among the meads
Of Phrygia and in its puzzling flow
Glides back and forth and meets itself and sees
Its waters on their way and winds along,
Facing sometimes its source, sometimes the sea.
So Daedalus in countless corridors
Built bafflement, and hardly could himself
Make his way out, so puzzling was the maze.*

*Within this labyrinth Minos shut fast
The beast, half bull, half man, and fed him twice
On Attic blood, lot-chosen each nine years,
Until the third choice mastered him. The door,
So difficult, which none of those before
Could find again, by Adriadne's aid
Was found, the thread that traced the way rewound.
Then Theseus, seizing Minos' daughter, spread
His sails for Naxos, where, upon the shore,
That cruel prince abandoned her and she,
Abandoned, in her grief and anger found
Comfort in Bacchus' arms. He took her crown
And set it in the heavens to win her there
A star's eternal glory; and the crown
Flew through the soft light air and, as it flew,
Its gems were turned to gleaming fires, and still
Shaped as a crown their place in heaven they take
Between the Kneeler and him who grasps the Snake.*

Ovid, "The Minotaur," *Metamorphoses*
Book 8, lines 150-81, translated by A.D. Melville

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Introduction: Postmodernism, Translation and *Soudain le Minotaure*

“We live in a postmodern world, and postmodernism is about relativism.
My truth is your falsehood, and your falsehood is my truth.”
Barukh Binah

Translation has lived under a cloud of suspicion since the mythical Tower of Babel was erected to create a gaggle of languages confusing and dividing the human race. The translator in turn has been under much scrutiny, playing the *traduttore, traditore* (an Italian phrase coined centuries ago) who further cemented the belief that the translator was unable to achieve the coherent unity of the original text. Translation appeared to be derisively condemned for eternity, always categorized as a faulty imitation and forever inferior to the original.

Postmodernist theory however, cast a suspicious eye upon the blind acceptance of “the supremacy of the original” (Hermans 1985: 8) which merely served to demonstrate the original’s outstanding qualities by highlighting the inadequacies of the translation, subsequently perpetuating its secondary existence. But to conceive a text in postmodern terms offers new possibilities for both the practice and theory of translation.

Postmodernists, aided by the theories of Derrida, Foucault and Barthes, gave awareness to the text by questioning whether it has any identifiable limits and borders. The text is conceptualized as an intertext, itself a translation, blurring the distinction of the original by carrying traces of other texts. It deconstructs the hierarchy between the original text and its versions, as well as reconfiguring the conception of authorship and originality, and thus, translation. Translation in the age of postmodernism can no longer be simply conceived as the reproduction of an original, but has become subject to the rewriting of an already pluralized original (Littau 1997).

The ideal way to put this theory to test is to illustrate the translation of a postmodern text. Postmodern writing, fiction or criticism, highlights the very conventions which are part of the writing process and makes visible the devices of their own construction; this helps in deconstructing the text for the purpose of translation.

I selected the novel *Soudain le Minotaure*, written by Marie H  l  ne Poitras, a young Qu  b  coise whose artistic creativity is darkly alluring. Poitras's novel bears traces of Greek mythology, taps into various literary influences and strays into different cultures, languages and races. It questions and interprets distinctively postmodern subjects: the author, the Other, language, realism, truth and society. It is a novel so rich in postmodern substance that a straightforward, linear, literal approach to its translation is virtually impossible.

I'd like to borrow the image of the golden thread from the myth of Theseus and The Labyrinth to demonstrate the translation of *Soudain le Minotaure* into English. The image suggests that the translated text can be lost within a metaphorical labyrinth, living in a world of in-betweens, simply offering comparisons and errors to its readers, never fully unveiling its own originality. However, *Soudain le Minotaure* is a postmodern text and therefore my debt exceeds that of the original as various sources, languages and cultures encourage the translation to become its own original. The translated text, the golden thread, as constructed by the translator, is thereby liberated.

Penetrating Soudain le Minotaure – Inside the Labyrinth

“Reading furnishes the mind only with material of knowledge;
it is thinking that makes what we read ours.”
John Locke

Translating is not the search for simple equivalents, but of seeking the *meaning*. Author and translator JIN Di recognizes that “there is no text without a context, which means the exact meaning of a text has to be defined by its context, which is often behind the scenes” (2003: 73). Therefore, the need to fully explore the historical, social and fictional contexts of *Soudain le Minotaure* is paramount to this translation project.

A novel can seem like a heavy dead weight as it sits desolately on a dusty shelf, but slowly takes its first breath as the reading experience begins. Translation is figuratively the act of reading, writing and interpreting a text. The interpretation of a literary text “is a creative act carried out by every reader and thus by every translator” (Boase-Beir & Holman 1999: 15). The source text is continually interpreted and reinvented, encouraging the reader and/or translator to share in the creative process. To read therefore is to translate.

Antoine Berman (1995) places great emphasis on the minute critical reading of a translation project. He suggests the translator read and reread the original, underlining the text in preparation for a future confrontation. From a simple cursive reading, it quickly becomes a textual pre-analysis. This defining stage in literary translation should be devoted to penetrating the text at a surface level, identifying the culture, structure, phrases, idioms and words, as well as at the underlying level, interpreting the symbolism, significance and subtext.

Lawrence Venuti (1995) echoes this critical reading as a translation strategy that flaunts the productive and transformative role of the translator. A text's plurality can be fully appreciated, for when it is reread, it is reread differently. The translator now takes on an active role in the process of meaning: exposing multiple meanings in the original text, in addition to displacing it with other meanings. This deconstructs the coherence of the text, unearthing the intertext and giving it more significations.

Merging postmodernist theories with Berman and Venuti's critical reading strategies, I will deconstruct Poitras's text to fully interpret its meanings. The following chapters examine *Soudain le Minotaure* as a postmodern literary work for the purpose of enlightening my translation. In postmodern terms, this will lead to the production, rather than the reproduction of the text.

The Writer and the Text – Marie Hélène Poitras and Soudain le Minotaure

“To endow the writer publicly with a good fleshly body,
to reveal that he likes dry white wine and underdone steak,
is to make even more miraculous for me,
and of a more divine essence, the products of his art.”
Roland Barthes

Roland Barthes began interrogating the author's importance (or lack thereof) in relation to their text in his seminal essay 'The Death of the Author' (1967). Postmodernists argued that attention to an author highlighted the wrong particularities of a text; it implied seeing him or her as an original as well as the text. More importantly for postmodernists, the reader, listener and/or spectator involved in the interpretation of the work should act independently of any of the supposed intentions of the author (Butler 2002). Thus the 'Death of the Author' paves the way for the visibility of the translator.

My main concern is the interpretation and subsequent translation of *Soudain le Minotaure*; not the author or her possible intentions. Yet to completely negate the existence of the author is a postmodern conundrum for the translator who has traditionally been indebted to the author as well as to their work. In the same way the world of translation recoils in horror when one of their members is hidden behind the shadow of the author, I choose to respect that the text has been conceived by an individual who deserves recognition.

In the spring of 2003, Marie H el ene Poitras was awarded the prestigious *prix Anne-H ebert* for her first literary effort, *Soudain le Minotaure*. What originated as an ambitious and enthusiastic graduate thesis at l'Universit e du Qu ebec   Montr eal evolved into “*une analyse vive et profonde des pulsions d'un jeune homme en proie   une col ere primitive d'une extr eme violence, mais temp er e par le regard humain d'une romanci ere au ton juste et neuf*” (Le Devoir 2003).

Soudain le Minotaure is set in the urban landscape of Montr eal; a mythical Minotaure is let loose through the winding streets, rabidly hunting down human sacrifices. Devised as a diptych, Poitras unites predator and prey for a brief, life altering moment. Guatemalan immigrant Mino Torr es speaks from his prison cell, vividly fantasizing about his crimes and of his 31st victim who escaped. Parallel to his tale, student Ariane reflects upon her life, suddenly disrupted and tenderly fragile. She hopes to renew her faith in mankind by fleeing her native Qu ebec and seeking solace in Germany's surviving historical memorials.

The Gazette's Joel Yanofsky opines “the conventional wisdom about first novels – that they are modest affairs, generally narrow in range, invariably autobiographical, no

longer holds” (2006). Honoured for her first literary effort, Poitras’s readers and critics were anxiously awaiting her sophomore outing; the excellent volume of short stories, *La Mort de mignonne et d’autres histoires*. This is quite a feat when most writers have numerous short stories jammed in drawers that will likely never see the light of day.

Poitras is currently inventing her very own literary freedom. She is Music Editor at Montréal’s urban weekly *VOIR*, all the while contributing to several Québec literary journals. She has been writing since childhood and was known to peruse Disney tales or Greek myths at bedtime. As a young writer, she is assiduously honing her craft: “*Je ne suis pas du genre à sortir un roman aux deux ans,*” she says. “*J’ai un rythme assez lent et je suis plutôt perfectionniste*” (Chainey 2003). Relatively fresh out of university, Poitras’s literary background is intimately guided by her studies, which favoured a rich and eclectic corpus. “*Les romanciers d’aujourd’hui, grâce à leurs études universitaires, imitent les grandes tendances de la littérature internationale,*” Maurice Lemire explains (1997: 20).

Poitras is particularly influenced by writers who deconstruct literature: mixing styles, introducing elements of popular culture, presenting an enlightened image of society instead of a single point of view. Patrick Brisebois immediately recognized that Poitras is “*entichée de Sade et de Nabokov, d’Anne Hébert et Patricia Highsmith*” (2003).

Highsmith maintained that writers are promised complete freedom from social boundaries because they are virtually ‘classless’: “Creative people do not pass moral judgment (...) they usually mix easily, whatever their background” (1983: 26). And this is the very reason Poitras admires the suspense writer. She appreciates Highsmith’s

“approche amoral de l’humain m’a donné envie de faire naître des personnages sans les juger...” (La Presse 2005). Highsmith’s fabulously disturbing anti-hero Tom Ripley set the stage for Mino Torrès. Poitras succeeded in creating a monster and while some writers tend to resent the monster they created, she does not recoil from Mino Torrès.

Poitras confesses her literary poisons are love, death, desire and horses. Her economy and pared down lyricism are translated into erotic perversion. In *Soudain le Minotaure*, she creates a powerful sense of menace as she explores the teeming horrors of her literary anti-hero’s psyche. Yet, Poitras’s interest in fiction writing remains unpretentious: *“Je crois qu’il existe un jour de mentir, une sorte d’excitation dans la création, quelque chose de masturbatoire lié à l’invention d’histoires de toutes sortes”* (2001: 131).

Soudain le Minotaure as Postmodern Literature

"Oui, beaucoup de ces personnages sont purs,
malgré le monde vulgaire dans lequel ils évoluent.
Ils sont toujours à la veille de vivre une grande
désillusion ou en train de la vivre."
Marie Hélène Poitras

Soudain le Minotaure encompasses a plurality that is synonymous with postmodern fiction. It is a journey in thought, language, reading and writing, characterised by the personal quests of the novel's main characters, Mino and Ariane, who exhibit the reverent scepticism of postmodern culture. Mino vehemently contests the status quo by erecting his own dubious moral structure to justify his crimes, while a traumatised Ariane must come to terms with her lack of faith in the world. She must however have faith in someone or something, and to achieve that she confronts her preconceived sense of reality.

Soudain le Minotaure projects the uncertainty about the contradictory nature of the world (McHale 1987), illustrating the labyrinths that we willingly, yet inadvertently, enter in life. As such, Poitras confirms that the organisation of *Soudain le Minotaure* as a text is disrupted and contested; its interpretation is now subjective and no longer delimited. And that is postmodernity's very objective.

Postmodernity arose from a cultural crisis that began in modernism and was influenced by a number of French intellectuals, most notably cultural critic Roland Barthes, philosopher Jacques Derrida and historian Michel Foucault, all of whom began their work by thinking about the implications of modernism. Postmodernists developed a distinct way of seeing the world as a whole, and applied a set of philosophical ideas that supported not only an aesthetic but also analysed the late capitalist cultural condition of

postmodernity (Butler 2002). Postmodernity belongs to a pluralistic and intricately interconnected society lacking any single dominant centre of political power, communication or intellectual production. However, in such a pluralistic society no one framework is likely to gain assent. This society is moving towards decentralization for its structures are characteristically fluid and involve the destabilization of textual, generic and social boundaries (Gregson 2004).

Consequently, the dominant strategy of postmodernist philosophy and aesthetics is deconstruction. The postmodern deconstructionist wishes to demonstrate that a previously trusted relationship or historical, cultural and psychological assumptions can be lead astray (Lyotard 1984). It is precisely such features that postmodern fiction deconstructs. In staging a confrontation between the world of the text and our own, it enacts a disconcerting sceptical triumph over our sense of reality and also over the accepted narrative.

Soudain le Minotaure is many things at once: it can be idealistic, but warns us not to be naïve; it is fiercely violent and cynical, yet recognizes beauty; it revisits one of history's darkest periods to later question the solitude and angst of a violent urban society. This is not to say that Poitras cannot decide what her novel wants and should be, but simply illustrates that not all is well in this postmodern world and nothing should be taken at face value. Poitras surveys the dynamics of society's faulty structure at a distance and engages in the sceptical process of (de)construction. Her perceptions of human relations, knowledge and identity, are questioned at great length. The current disruption in texts – language, style, ideologies and values - corresponds to society's instability: the result is that the reading of a postmodern text is rarely reassuring.

Postmodern Literature in Québec

“*Les dieux ont chaviré.*”

François Ricard

The postmodern text is mainly defined as fluid with no identifiable borders. Therefore *Soudain le Minotaure*'s relationship with Québec literature is more by association than obligation. *Soudain le Minotaure* does inherit Québec's complex literary past by default: no text can be free of that constraint, with each writer inevitably representing his or her literary history.

To entirely remove Poitras's novel from its literary heritage can arguably be seen as a disservice to the translator whose work has conventionally been based on the culture and language of the source text. On the other hand, postmodern texts do not need to be linked to a specific tradition to reap the benefits of translation. They easily appeal to a translated audience because they subscribe to many different and often contradictory ideas instead of remaining within the rigid borders of the writer's national literature.

Québec literature's recent transformations echo those of postmodern literature. Québec's collective identity and particular dialect is no longer at the forefront; international French is preferred and writers are interested and inspired by themes that concern all modern societies: urban solitude, spirituality, violence, personal relationships, homosexuality, drugs, AIDS...etc. Yet despite the disparity of the themes, these works remain very much Québécois. Jean Piccolec concurs “*tous ces ouvrages n'étant pas désincarnés, il est évident qu'ils parlent du Québec et des Québécois, mais les sujets abordés sont généraux, universels et pourraient être 'adaptés' ailleurs*” (qtd. in Lemire 1997: 31). The novels that contested Québec's former ideological systems are now called postmodern (Paterson 1993).

One postmodern theme that featured significantly in Québec literature is the quest for an individual identity. Québec writers embraced their political freedom by abandoning the resentful *nous* for the self-confident postmodern *je*. Lise Gauvin contends Québec literature reached emancipation once “*(elle) se conçoit comme littérature avant d’être québécoise, cette littérature qui a enfin appris à dire je...*” (1997: 23).

The introduction of *je* in the Québec novel substantially modified the literature. The emphasis is less on the society but on the individual living and breathing in that society, paying closer attention to problems that directly affects the individual. The debatable downside is that the literature now manifests itself as predominantly self-centered with the influx of *je*. But Christian Mistral (whose *œuvre* is dedicated to his *je*) points out that today’s generation “*sont ensemble, cependant: même sans sortir de chez eux, devant leur clavier, reliés les uns aux autres...*” (2004).

Different threads connect Québec literature: the ties that now bind belong to the World Wide Web, its infinite possibilities, cross cultural properties and inherent ability to make the world seem like a smaller place. Mistral’s generation has reconciled with Québec’s past and has readily digested the Euro-American modernism and influences that inevitably fuel the culture and literature. “*Ce qui est essentiel dans toute appartenance culturelle minoritaire, c’est d’être toujours de son temps, de saisir instinctivement tous les paramètres qui conditionnent l’apparition de phénomènes nouveaux*” (Lemire 1997: 721).

Soudain le Minotaure reflects this literary trend. Poitras can easily untangle herself from Québec, refusing to play the part of writer as ‘spokesperson’, avoiding nearly all social responsibility and allowing imagination to take center stage. When

Poitras exclaims “*les plus grands artistes outrepassent leur pays d’origine*” (VOIR 2004) we must understand that the very act of writing, of creating, is transcendent: true artistry is when the boundaries of language and culture can almost be entirely blurred.

Rewriting the Myth – Ariadne and the Minotaur

“Human beings have always been mythmakers.”
Karen Armstrong

The Greeks created the first world literature when they expanded their world into universal myth. Myths precede literature, from mouth to ear, centuries before they were breathed onto the page. Margaret Atwood explains that “strong myths never die. Sometimes they die down, but they don’t die out. They double back in the dark, they re-embody themselves, they change costumes, they change key, they speak in new languages, they take on other meanings” (2005: 35). Poitras accomplishes her own rewriting, a translating of sorts, by building references of Greek Mythology into *Soudain le Minotaure*.

Rewriting suggests adopting allusions which “is an imaginative process of integrating other writing; taking particular elements of another work and making explicit or implicit references to them” (Lefevere 1992: 22). André Lefevere contends that “rewriting is simply a cultural given of our time” (1992: 14) which rings true considering that postmodern literature allows and favours the systematic strategy of mixing of genres, integrating quotes, references and the borrowing of other works. For the postmodern writer, the belief is that no communication is devoid of myth, metaphor, cultural bias and political content. Postmodernists tend to fix upon a narrative that is most likely part of the reader’s subconscious and build on it from that point on.

Lefevere further explains that “writers often allude to well-known texts in their own literature to give a sharper edge to the point they are making” (24). Translators must recognize these allusions and decide to what extent it should be represented in the translated work. During my translation of *Soudain le Minotaure*, I continually referred to the myth’s imagery: it is a crucial part of the text and the thread that guided me throughout.

In Greek Mythology, the Minotaur is a monstrous double: sometimes with the head of a bull and the body of a man or alternatively with the body of a bull and the head of a man. This creature is the offspring of Pasiphae, wife of Minos King of Crete, and a snow white bull sent by Poseidon who was irate with Minos. Minos was wildly humiliated by this punishment and ordered Daedalus, a skillful artificer, to hide the vile monster. Daedalus built the Labyrinth, an enormous maze, and placed the Minotaur at the centre, delivering 14 maidens and young boys for yearly sacrifice. Theseus, a young prince, sought to rid Greece of this unfortunate tragedy. Guided by a golden thread given to him by Ariadne, Theseus entered and escaped the Labyrinth, successfully killing the Minotaur.

Neither being fully human nor animal nor god, the ambiguity of the figure of the Minotaur placed it alongside conventional bounds of norms and morals. The monstrous double became important to the European Surrealist movement because its mythology inscribed both the violence of sacrificial rites and cultural alterity (part bull/part man) as the functional text of Western society (Bulfinch 2000). Artists such as Dali, Miro and Matisse featured the Minotaur in their art. This figure epitomizes the many dark forces of chaos in ancient legend and Poitras borrows this mythical creature to create the modern

day monster of Mino Torrès. Mino represents the man-beast who wages a war within the confines of the city of Montréal. His reign solely depends on whether he can be caught and stopped.

The myth of the Labyrinth implies deception, a vertiginous loss of orientation, a suffocating sense of entrapment. The Labyrinth not only represents a physical space but also an emotional space in which both characters long to escape. The postmodern novel is preoccupied with significance: “*La signification des symboles confirme donc la signification à tirer des diverses composantes du récit, et du coup, le sens qui se dégage de l’ensemble de l’oeuvre*” (Magnan & Morin 1997: 105).

Postras structures her story in a metaphorical maze. She envisions Mino’s Ontario prison as a jungle of thick concrete corridors and the streets he once roamed as a maze of alleys. And within this labyrinth, Mino dreams of his sacrifices: “*Moi, l’enfant-animal difforme, j’orchestrai le carnage (...) je chiquerai des organes vitaminées, encore frémissants de n’être pas tout à fait éteints*” (2002: 40). And Ariane is disoriented; she challenges her sense by subjecting them to a rigorous training session, feeling, touching, smelling her way out of her nightmare: “*qu’est qu’on est faible quand on est privé de ses sens!*” (116) she cries. Postras rewrites the legend of Ariadne and her golden thread: Ariane reflects on many occasions “*de toute cette histoire, je suis l’héroïne et la victime*” (110). Ariane emerges from Postras story as the rightful heroine, no longer eclipsed in mythology.

Postras presents the reader with an ingenious reinterpretation of the Greek myth. One thing is certain though, no re-inventor of a myth can entirely claim personal creativity.

Intertextuality - Tout est dit. Rien n'est épuisé

"Cutting and pasting is the essence of what hip-hop culture is all about for me. It's about drawing from what's around you, and subverting it and decontextualizing it."
DJ Shadow

Umberto Eco stated in his postmodern novel, *The Name of the Rose*, "books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told" (1983). No text ever finally establishes anything about the world outside itself; it never comes to rest, but merely, to use Derrida's term, 'disseminates' variations on previously established concepts, ideas or art forms (Butler 2002). This variation is referred to as intertextuality, a relationship between two or more texts that quote from one another, allude to one another or otherwise connect, which is postmodernism's most notable contribution to literary theory.

The term intertextuality was coined by the French critic Julia Kristeva and is one of those rare terms of literary theory that has migrated into the mainstream media (Mullan 2006). The postmodern text employs intertextuality to integrate different literary suggestions for the reader precisely because it aims to represent reading and writing. The text demands a careful reading, urging the reader to explore all of its dimensions, as well as the other texts within. The reader explores a text in which a simple, linear reading is no longer sufficient in unearthing its essence. Thus, a postmodern reading implies several multidimensional readings based mainly on intertextuality.

By weaving intertextuality into *Soudain le Minotaure*, Poitras confirms that her modus operandi is not linear, and either confirms or invalidates several themes in the novel. Scattering quotes throughout the text from various origins, and alluding to other

sources, Poitras calls upon other writers to mirror her text, multiplying the paths the text travels and delivering different dimensions by projecting it into a larger universe.

Greek Mythology is the central text that Poitras uses to build *Soudain le Minotaure* but she also visits Nobel Prize winner Gabriel García Márquez, who features significantly in the text. This added dimension to the text is not apparent, but astute readers will easily recognize the author's presence in Poitras's first novel.

Chronique d'une mort annoncée, García Márquez's slender 1981 novel, tells the story of the Vicario brothers who kill the man responsible for taking their sister's virginity (considered rape) in order to clear her name. The novel is found on Ariane's bookshelf and Mino prophetically reminisces: "*Je ne savais pas ce qu'était un viol avant de lire 'Cronica de una muerte anunciada' de García Márquez*" (2002: 60). Literature introduced Mino to rape and ironically, the literature Ariane loves is now her source of anguish. The novel's presence in the text speaks volumes; its central theme revolving around the powerlessness of women (Ariane) and cultural traditions like honour (Mino). In the Columbian town where the narrative takes place, honour is of a high importance. Any character lacking honour is forcefully rejected by the entire community. For South American Mino, honour is presiding over the women in his life: mother, sister, wife. Yet, it is also listening to his uncle Tio who urges him to 'get' women and teaches him the rudiments of sex, rape included, or more precisely, not excluded. Whereas the women in García's novel have no say in their destiny, Ariane refuses to be cast aside. Her lack of power and loss of honour is down to one unfortunate night.

Poitras further peppers her text with references to literature, a device that is specifically referred to as '*autoreprésentation*': when the text incorporates references

towards reading, writing and creating. Janet Paterson confirms that *“le roman postmoderne parle inlassablement de l’écriture, de la lecture, du travail critique et, d’une façon plus générale, de l’art”* (1993: 20). Postmodern characters tend to seek out an environment where creativity takes center stage. If they are not creators themselves, they gravitate towards it.

Literature student Ariane turns to poetic language to make sense of her assault: *“Je dirai à mes amis de littérature que je ressemble désormais, avec mes yeux écarlates, à ce personnage aux ‘prunelles crevées’ des poèmes d’Anne Hébert”* (2002: 125). During the attack, her mind inescapably wanders into a violent scene inspired by American writer Brett Easton Ellis, infamous for his penchant for graphic details: *“je suis un personnage des romans noirs de Brett Easton Ellis dont l’action se déroule dans un quartier paumé de New York”* (109). Ellis is notoriously responsible for penning probably one of the most violent novels in postmodern literature: ‘American Psycho’ features a Wall Street serial killer who tortures and murders women for pleasure.

As for Mino, his literary education is apocalyptic: his uncle Tio continues to teach him French while he is in prison, feeding him Rimbaud’s dark poetry and the sadistic works of Sade.

Postras also selects music to build her text. Like a DJ sampling different beats, she sets the tone with the lyrics of popular rock songs as the soundtrack of her tale. She opts for P.J. Harvey’s guitar screeching ‘Meet the Monsta’ to introduce the malevolent Mino, and Tori Amos presents the calmly poignant ‘Hotel’ for Ariane. Cruelly, and not without irony, the beautiful and ethereal sounds of British group Portishead resonate in the background as Ariane is attacked.

Intertextuality ends up in a kind of textual idealism, because all texts are seen as perpetually referring to other ones, rather than any external reality. Christopher Butler explains:

“The translated text flaunts and re-emphasises the intertextual basis upon the exclusion of which the myth of textual, or authorial, autonomy is founded: always bearing the marks of (at least) two writers, always bearing the traces of other texts and contexts” (2002: 32).

At the risk of generalization, we can conclude that Poitras’s *Soudain le Minotaure* is in itself a translation.

The Subject-ed - Characters in Soudain le Minotaure

"A heart that's full up like a landfill,
A job that slowly kills you,
Bruises that won't heal.
You look so tired and unhappy,
Bring down the government,
They don't speak for us.
I'll take a quiet life..."
Radiohead, *No Surprises*

The postmodern self is conceived much differently than the ‘liberal humanist self’, which presents the self as autonomous and somehow free of any particular cultural, ethnic, or gendered characteristics. The term preferred by postmodernists to apply to individuals is not so much ‘self’ as ‘subject’, because the latter term implicitly draws attention to the ‘subject-ed’ condition of the persons who are, whether they know it or not, controlled or constituted by the ideologically motivated discourses of power which predominates in the society they inhabit (Butler 2002: 50).

Soudain le Minotaure’s characters are created following (or corresponding to) some basic characteristics belonging to postmodernism. Primarily, the postmodern

character is created in '*double définition*' as defined by Magnan and Morin (1997). The reader is aware of whom the character is fundamentally, but they do not have the character's entire portrait under their eyes. The reader can analyse the character by clues disseminated throughout the text but will only have the complete picture once the entire tale has been told. This is because the postmodern character is continually searching for answers and searching for their identity, developing and evolving during a rite of passage and the action unfolding in the story is a reflection of this developing character. Poitras's reader is left to untangle the threads of Mino and Ariane's complex identities.

Poitras draws her reader into the deep recesses of her characters minds, delivering a subjective narration for both by using the pronoun *je*. Mino and Ariane are both the main character and narrator. The '*je*' respects the individual and also stresses the importance of everyday life (Boisvert 1995). The interior monologues Poitras's characters proclaim are naturally deceptive: we all create an image of ourselves that we ardently believe in and painfully yearn to present to the outside world. Therefore simple facts about the world of *Soudain le Minotaure* are contradictory; there appears to be no reliable centre of consciousness and the narrators, Mino and Ariane, survive in an ambiguous mental state that tends to affect a fair number of postmodernist protagonists.

Mino and Ariane, as well as most individuals, would like to believe that they are free thinking beings, yet that is rarely the case. The postmodern self is constituted by discourses, which although they may most obviously dominate the female, the homosexual, the colonized, have us all, more or less, firmly in their grip. In the midst of their relatively safe reality, postmodern characters are perpetually suspicious of domination by others (McHale 1987). Ariane's attack is a reflection of the male-

dominated society she inhabits, while Mino is governed by a policed society that robs him of his personal freedom.

Postmodern characters frequently lack physical descriptions, the emphasis being on their emotional journey. *“La quête porte beaucoup plus sur l’intériorité des personnages (...) c’est mentalement qu’ils se métamorphosent”* (Magnan & Morin 1997: 59). Poitras flaunts Ariane as a swollen purple bruise. Ariane complains *“on croit que je vais de mal en moins pire parce que le pourpre de mes ecchymoses tourne au rose”* (2002: 138). The reader is intensely aware of the painful physical ailments she takes morbid pride in detailing. Staring dauntlessly at her injuries, she is conquering her fears.

Mino is described as a police composite sketch. He is of South American descent; Spanish accent, short, and smells of sweat because he wears no cologne. This is the patchy description his victims have relayed to the police. Poitras leaves it up to her reader to decide what ‘evil’ physically resembles.

Another type of character that appears in postmodern literature is the symbol-character who solidifies the passions of the character and embodies their weaknesses, doubts and, occasionally, strengths. This type of character typically has meaning in their name; it’s a revealing significance that becomes the reflection of their actions and relationships. Poitras’s characters are clearly named after two of Greek mythology’s characters: Ariane’s surname is conspicuously absent and Mino is granted one – Torrès - to cement his representation of the beastly Minotaur.

Mino is the man-bull trapped in a cage and just like the mythical Minotaur, his desires take centre stage. Postmodern writers tend to "treat the crucial issue of identity,

especially in relation to notions of desire" (Gregson 2004: 5). Mino is a violent rapist, an uncontrollable predator ready to explode: he leers, he pounces, he devours. Unable to control the impulses that drive him, he demands human sacrifices. He remains in complete denial over his actions; a disturbing cross between a psychopath and a misogynist: "*si l'homme a envie de violer, elle lui donnera l'impression de n'être bonne qu'à ça*" (2002: 17).

Ariane differs from her mythical twin because she refuses to accept her role of victim. Her journey is emotionally fraught: she is lost after the attack, abandoned to a world she ignored, a world of fear and resentment. Postmodern characters frequently find themselves drained of their strength; their anxieties characterized by paranoia and fragmentation. Postmodern society is suspicious and its characters reflect this uncertainty.

Fictional Reality

"Reality is the only word in the English language that should always be used in quotes."
Anonymous

'Reality' can never be wholly or convincingly mastered, as a result attacking realism is central to all types of postmodernist activity. It is precisely here where the act of (de)construction does its greatest work by refusing to accept the possibility of any sustained realism in any text (Munslow 1997). Postmodernists do not so much as discover the nature of reality as (de)construct it, and so their work is open to all the hidden biases and metaphors which we have seen.

The lines of reality and fiction are easily blurred in postmodern writing for the reason being that many texts reinforce the capitalist economy that mirrors the truth behind social conditions:

“the balance between fiction and reality has changed significantly in the past decade. Increasingly their roles are reversed. We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind - mass-merchandizing, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the instant translation of science and technology into popular imagery, the increasing blurring and intermingling of identities within the realm of consumer goods, the pre-empting of any free or original imaginative response to the experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel” (Ballard 1993:8).

This ‘enormous novel’, poured over by postmodernists, presumes that fiction swells into every aspect of life, significantly altering the reader’s perception of reality as well as their expectations of literature. It mainly establishes a sort of confusion between the work and the writer, who struggles to create a realistic fictional text that succeeds in convincing sceptical readers!

This ardent desire of the ‘real’ for the reader is one of the paradoxical conditions of postmodernism. Writers maintain that they are creating something that is steeped in actual real life experience; this is what they claim drives them to write in the first place. And readers claim to object to the increase of fictional dimensions. Yet, if one were to take a quick glance at the current best seller list, ‘real life’ accounts have unceremoniously dethroned fiction. Poitras explains:

“en général, je crois que les lecteurs ont l’impression qu’une œuvre inspirée de faits vécus a une plus grande valeur, comme si elle était plus vraie ou susceptible de révéler les grands secrets du monde. Tout particulièrement à notre époque où les émissions de télé-réalité et les blogues ont la cote” (2005: 16).

The postmodern interpretation of reality demands an answer to an important question: can art be independent of its creator?

As a young writer, Poitras does not stray far from home: *Soudain le Minotaure* was inspired by real life events. Poitras selected a traumatic personal incident as a

springboard to launch her first novel: *“L’histoire qui a lancé mon projet d’écriture est digne d’un mauvais scénario sensationnaliste, mais tout de même inspirée d’un fait réel, soit la tentative de meurtre par strangulation dont j’ai été victime en novembre 1997”* (2001: 125). Lemire deems this postmodern strategy to be fictional as well as cathartic: *“tous les romanciers soucieux des codes de la postmodernité se cherchent dans leur écriture”* (1997: 20). Celia Hunt observed that most students and first time novelists *“tended to use themselves as a starting point for fiction”* (2000: 10). Hunt’s theory purports that writers do not necessarily attempt to portray the facts, rather their goal is *“to convey the essence of (these) memories and experiences through the feelings and emotions associated with them, using the techniques of fiction and with a literary end product in view”* (12).

Postras’s fiction does not arouse disbelief; on the contrary, the starkness of her prose encourages the reader to believe that her characters are real people in real situations. Like an irate bull, Postras confronts head on the violent emotions and sensations of danger and fear, for they are naturally alluring to a writer. Postras’s fictional twin, Ariane, reveals *“pourtant la réalité entraîne parfois la vie plus loin que la fiction n’oserait le faire, de peur d’y perdre en vraisemblance”* (2002: 108). The postmodern reader is aware that Postras has delivered a subjective interpretation of reality that can, and will be, deconstructed.

Yves Boisvert (1998) agrees that the postmodern discourse is not necessarily aimed at expressing reality. *“J’écris par opportunisme,”* Postras divulged to a local journalist shortly after the publication of *Soudain le Minotaure*. *“J’ai un rapport vampirique au réel, d’agression envers la réalité. Il m’arrive de voler des phrases aux*

gens...” (Navarro 2003). Poitras clearly savours the solitary occupation of writing fiction, of building this unique world where she controls and orchestrates every minute detail. She contends that fiction’s very purpose is to distort reality: as a vibrant observer of the world, a writer has the freedom of inspiration, disfiguration or perception. ‘*Le jour de mentir*’ as she calls it, is the greatest reward of fiction writing.

The Other - A Space of Translation

"This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine."
Prospero, *The Tempest*

Gayatri Spivak is of the belief that “the interesting literary text might be precisely the text where you do not learn what the majority cultural representation or self-representation might be” (1992: 377). Postmodern philosophy has been inspired by this principle and devoted much work to the deconstruction of the conceptual boundaries of society’s views on gender, race, sexual orientation and ethnicity; essentially what is condemned as ‘the Other’. Postmodernists demand recognition of difference and acceptance by including the hybridized culture structures of the moment. Consequently, postmodern literature’s actuality is extremely important for it tackles issues that characterize our society, which Poitras interprets in *Soudain le Minotaure*.

A key cultural shift marking postmodernism was the rise of the feminist movement, resulting in a vast number of texts explicitly feminist, as well as texts by male writers highlighting a perceptive awareness of gender issues. The correlation between feminism and postmodernism is that women are traditionally excluded from the dominant male discourse and have been defined as ‘the Other’, and inferior, as a result of it. Yet, not all women writers strive to be feminists or consistently dispute their role as the Other.

When feminist art and literature have been attacked, it was for their one-dimensional approach and general assumptions about the differences between the sexes, ignoring the postmodernist emphasis on the ambiguous nature of identity (Gregson 2004).

Postras is not insensitive towards the feminist plight but it is simply not her writing position. She insists that she did not want to give “*un ton féminisant à l’histoire*” (2001: 159) and hopes her story reaches as many men as women. Postras specifically introduces the sexually ambiguous Ihmre to further blur the distinction between men and women. Nevertheless, Postras does not ignore the brutal facts of Ariane's attack: “*l’agression n’était pas dirigée contre sa personne, mais plutôt contre sa féminité*” (156). Ariane’s views on sex are indelibly tainted after the attack, “*je pressentais des signes de trop-plein désir partout où je posais les yeux*” (2002: 199). The world is one big sex shop, but Ariane confronts the sexual clichés thrown at her and untangles herself from the situation, to meet, and consequently accept, the Other.

Postras is exceptionally adept at writing about the Other, specifically as a man, an immigrant, and in particular, a misogynist rapist. When creating Mino, she was conscious that what she would learn would be disturbing and experienced some fear at the prospect, yet that was the very challenge. She sought to destroy social stability by feverishly exploring the hidden impulses of human beings. She touched evil: “*Je me suis assise sur son coeur, j’ai essayé de déchiffrer ses pensées, d’interpréter ses rêves et j’ai fantasmé avec lui...*” (2001: 144). Postras worked to actually create or bring into being the deviant, which can be described as an extension of the Other, by normalizing Mino’s discourse. His discourse introduces the secondary identities of those who are usually excluded from participating in society.

Mino is a nasty piece of literary work, the antihero, the quintessential loser devoid of any redeeming qualities. His claim to fame is terrorizing and raping women. He repeats continuously that his victims were asking for it, even expecting it. "*Cette fille était une invitation au viol*" (2002: 34) and he promises ominously, "*Je voulais flétrir une fille blanche, libérée, insoumise, intellectuelle et belle*" (44). He believes his victims are personally responsible for whatever evils befall them: they dare walk the streets at night, to leave their homes unaccompanied, to flaunt their bodies. If he wants them, they are his.

Sexual desire is a major source of incoherence within the context of postmodern literature. "Sexual compulsiveness also means that the self is reduced to a mere machine of repetitive wanting or a helpless appendage to an overweening body part" (Gregson 2004: 57). Mino's penis is nearly a character in Poitras's novel. Even though he carries a knife to ensure the prompt submission of his victims, the reader knows that Mino's true weapon is his penis: "*J'ai mon sexe en main comme une arme*" (2002: 96), he spits out. Mino has been entertaining his sexual fantasies since adolescence; his first memories intermingled with his first erection. "*Le café, les livres, l'insomnie et la queue raide vers le ciel : tout cela est arrivé dans ma vie en même temps*" (39).

Mino is always trying to acquire and maintain his phallic power. He must exercise complete control over the women in his life. Therein lay his power: he wants his wife Maria to spend her days safe and alone in the apartment and is relentless in his belief that his sister Anna is one step away from being raped and/or abused by men (his guilty conscience overrides logic). By controlling them, he is affirming his power as a male. And it's not very different from the control he exercises over his victims: "*J'aurais un*

moment d'emprise sur ma vie, sur celle d'Ariane et de bien d'autres filles..." (56). Mino even attempts to control his epilepsy attacks which he believes are similar to his violent orgasms: "*Je la sens qui s'annonce, prête à exploser, comme une éjaculation*" (35).

Mino is also a new immigrant to the city trying to imperceptibly blend in. He is a marginal character in Québec society and has several barriers to break down: dark skin, foreign accent and a new language to learn. Montrealers, however, are commonly exposed to multi-ethnic variety, incredibly proud of their fine example of harmonious, multicultural co-habitation. But after the attack, Ariane is clearly deceived by this utopia, her scepticism as visible as her wounds: "*J'attends le métro à la station Guy-Concordia, devant les regards indiscrets de trois jeunes latinos assis en face de moi sur l'autre rive. Plus que jamais, je suis convaincue de la nécessité de porter une arme*" (2002: 174). She, the university student formerly open to new worlds, retreats into abject fear. Unsurprisingly, she has lost faith in the world around her and fears the Other.

Poitrás's characterization of Mino is quite ambitious because her subject is exilic and she is clearly not. She followed a similar ideology to create an exilic character as she did for a misogynist. She stepped out of her own cultural structure and opened herself to the Other. Through immigration, direct access to different cultures as well as a common and sympathetic understanding of foreign ideas, the consciousness of the other has drastically increased (Simon 1995). The postmodern writer has a dominant desire to give a voice to the marginalized.

Poitrás's reader is naturally confronted with the notion that Mino as a character, and one with negative qualities, might be a question of race. I partly refute that claim for it undermines and simplifies her text. Poitrás writes to meet the Other – not to distinguish

herself from him. She admires world travelers and explorers: "*Leurs aventures ont quelque chose à voir avec l'écriture comme expérience de l'Autre. Ils ont tous en commun l'oubli de leur ego et l'ouverture à l'Autre, même si celle-ci transgresse la morale établie*" (2001: 146). Poitras devotes as many chapters to the Guatemalan as to the native Québécoise, ensuring that both characters are perceived as equal, regardless of their actions or circumstances.

Yet despite her good intentions, Poitras is effectively translating Mino. She has constructed her vision of the Other by borrowing and interpreting from various sources. No matter how unbiased she aims to be, Poitras inevitably skews her depiction of Mino by pushing forward her point of view. Translation has traditionally featured as the literary equivalent of colonization and its mission was simple: to civilize (normalize in this case) the Other in order to savage (Cheyfitz 1997).

Urban Warrior

"Amid concrete and clay and general decay,
nature must still find a way."
The Smiths, *Stretch Out and Wait*

Postmodern society is characterized as urban and metropolitan. It's a society framed by metal and concrete, squats and towers, the homeless and the disenchanting, dirty metros and claustrophobic traffic jams: a society whose beauty is terminally faded. The metropolitan city, usually a port or university town beckoning foreigners, demands and asserts a literary modernity.

Montréal has developed a literary existence over the years, being featured as the omnipresent character of many texts. Montréal is the postmodern *terre promise* for the

characters of *Soudain le Minotaure* who leave behind the comfort of more 'natural' locales. Ariane drives up from small town Venise-en-Québec to share an apartment and to study literature. And Mino abandons Guatemala for the bright lights of big city: "*J'avais lu quelque part que Montréal était une ville cosmopolite*" (2002: 23). He quickly takes his place among the ethnic vendors at Jean-Talon Market amid the gargling of different languages.

Naturally, Montréal as *terre promise* quickly becomes a postmodern myth. It is instead a stifling Labyrinth where Mino wreaks havoc shamelessly and where Ariane's once purposeful and confident strides are replaced by furtive, tentative steps. Suddenly, danger lurks in every shadowy corner of the city. The myth of the liberated city is ripped wide open and Poitras joins those who "*fait le procès de la ville inhumaine, aliénante, impersonnelle et sans âme qui laisse les pauvres et des démunis dans le désarroi*" (Dorion 1997: 354), the prevalent description of postmodern society.

Poitras's cityscapes and landscapes are deceptively inviting, but the stifling prison of the self is always waiting to close in. Mignan and Morin stress, "*on ne s'étonnera pas que les récits postmodernes intègrent des espaces fermés, restreignants, des espaces connotés négativement*" (1997: 77). The notion of space in postmodern literature usually corresponds to the inner state of the character. Often, a closed in area or a situation that seems hopeless is transformed into a space of incubation in which the main character will metamorphose. Once they have crossed that space, once they have exited, they will be reborn.

For postmodernists, this restricted space can also mirror imprisonment which purportedly reveals the basic nature of society (Foucault qtd. in Butler 2002: 48).

Postmodern society is a re-write of Orwell's 1984: we are all being secretly observed and controlled. The messages we receive, the information we absorb, the images we process are diluted, to be then delivered by ominous unseen forces. In sum, society and the lives we lead are enclosed in barbed wire.

Ariane is in a psychological prison. Fear and paranoia grip her, governing her thoughts and actions as she fights the desire to remain in *le giron familial* after the attack. Her roommate immediately absconds to the safety of his *bas de fleuve natal* vowing never to return. Ariane refuses to surrender and confronts her fears head on. Deciding she is not a prisoner, she eventually escapes Montréal.

Soudain le Minotaure opens to Mino awaiting orders in the prison's infirmary. He is dissected by Nurse Smith and sedated by Doctor Parker. Carefully tucked away, Mino confirms society's reaction to 'nature'. Postmodernity has systematically deconstructed and interrogated nature's role due to the constant influx of cultural changes. Nature as a whole may seem to belong to the omnipresent powers of a god, or the hidden discoveries of scientists, or to the nurturing force of women, all of which are to be thought of inherently, that is naturally, more animal, less reasonable than 'us', which conflicts with the rationale behind postmodern theories (Butler 2002). But in nature, as in postmodern society, it is the survival of the fittest. And there is simply no place for Mino's primal instincts to roam freely in this society.

Poitras fills *Soudain le Minotaure* with images of violent predatory scenes. Mino is the king of his jungle: "*La nature me pousse à agir. Mes pulsions viennent du centre de la terre*" (2002: 29). His attitude towards sex is primal, to say the least. His odour is animalistic: his victims smell his musty stench before he pounces. He is the lion that lies

in wait for his prey: “*en jouant la proie, elle avait réveillé le prédateur en moi*” (34). His attack of Ariane leaves him bitterly disappointed: “*J’avais l’air con parce qu’elle n’avait pas peur. Elle ne jouait pas son rôle de proie...*” (49) but warns that she cannot win: “*elle verrait bien ce que la nature ordonne*” he snarls (44). And when Mino does meet Ariane again, in his fantasies, she takes him to an abattoir, showing him the civilized way to kill prey.

Journey to the Truth

"Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, *to make truth laugh*, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth."
Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*

The journey to a foreign land is an experience that inevitably heightens the senses, and for a writer it's a journey into another culture and language that can add an exotic dimension to their work. For the postmodern writer, “*la fuite est une autre façon de se chercher, surtout la fuite vers des ailleurs toujours pleins de promesses*” (Lemire 1997:19). It's a personal journey characterized by the search for identity: the self promises to emerge stronger, reinvented by the unfamiliar.

Postras delights in the different journeys, emotional and physical, that her characters embark on: “*Marie Hélène Postras promène ses monstres aussi bien à Saint-Jean-de-l'Anse (Sur la tête de Johnny Cash) qu'au Guatemala (Soudain le Minotaure)*” (Fortin 2005). Postras visits symbolic countries to construct *Soudain le Minotaure*: her reader travels from Québec to Germany with Ariane, and then off to Guatemala, reliving Mino's childhood, and finally to Costa Rica where he meets his wife.

Poitras uses travel not only to expand her cultural boundaries, but also to express the postmodern pursuit of the 'truth'. As mentioned, the postmodern deconstructor aims to demonstrate how a previously trusted relationship is no longer stable. This is evident by the growing assault on truth and memory. The basic attitude of postmodernists was that claims of any kind of overall, totalizing explanation should be treated suspiciously (Butler 2002). Philosophy and history are no longer to be privileged as a literal or truth-telling discourse; they can be read as if they were literature and vice versa.

War is a notable subtext of *Soudain le Minotaure*: it confirms that the horrors of the past, and not-so-distant past, cannot be accepted implicitly. Poitras prompts her characters to revisit the history of war, responding to sceptics by (de)constructing her version of the 'truth' for readers.

War is one of the greatest and most challenged discourses, in particular the Holocaust, which has come under attack by sceptics, some of whom frighteningly deny its existence (Lipsadt 1993). Ariane is compelled to visit the ruins of Dachau to witness true human horror. At the concentration camp, she finds flowers atop the ovens that burned bodies and mass graves covered with poppies. Germany has been rebuilt since World War II but what transpired under Hitler's rule will never be forgotten. The experience is traumatic but ultimately cathartic. Ariane's bruised and battered body is slowly healing, yet the wounds are still very fresh: she sees a Germany that has survived and so will she.

Mino hails from war torn Guatemala, a country with a reputation of world class repression that has indelibly left a lasting impression on him. Gregson explains 'that war is a natural activity for men who, deprived of it, will find compensatory outlets for their

desire for it..." (2004: 125). Mino wages a vicious war against himself and his sexual desires. Mino's first sexual encounter is in Costa Rica, forebodingly at the foot of the spewing Arenal Volcano. The volcano represents the eruption of Mino's first ejaculation at the hands of a prostitute. This subsequently cements his future relationships with women. "*Je savais maintenant ce qu'était une fille (...) la femme était un être que je pouvais maintenant juger: elle était jolie et fragile ou vénale et cynique*" (2002: 67). The infamous Arenal also mirrors Mino's unannounced epilepsy attacks.

Ariane finally retrieves her senses, her faith in the world at the Annual Love Parade in Berlin. High on Ecstasy, the rhythmic, anonymous, yet universal beats of techno music vibrate in her ears and over her skin. She loses herself to the touch and feel of others, amazed that she can experience this sense of freedom in a city once ravaged by hate and violence. Berlin is her city and city to the millions of ravers from around the world gyrating and pulsating beside her. Poitras ends the novel with this line: "*Comme l'estampille dans mon passeport prouvait ma visite en Allemagne, une marque témoignait de mon passage dans un autre pays d'histoire, celui des survivants*" (2002: 177). Ariane's journey is complete.

Language – Where the tongue slips, it speaks the truth

"Language is the blood of the soul into which thoughts run and out of which they grow."
Oliver Wendell Holmes

Soudain le Minotaure embraces a multiplicity of languages and cultures. Poitras *pense la langue*: she is visibly attracted to foreign languages, taking pleasure in introducing foreign expressions to her text. Effective communication with others is Poitras's focus, no matter how seemingly contaminated. She condones the English

language and uses popular expressions that require no translation for the perceptive Québécois and adds some German and Spanish for good measure.

The linguistic landscape she spins for Ariane isn't conflicted, but peacefully united in difference. Marco Miccone believes "*dans un contexte cosmopolite, l'identité, individuelle ou collective, peut difficilement être traduite par une seule langue (...) les québécois n'ont pas que le français comme langue identitaire*" (1989: 9). Despite their different cultures, Ariane and her Czechoslovakian lover communicate fluently. "*J'ignorais le tchèque, lui le français, je parlais bien anglais et me débrouillais en allemand, lui l'inverse. Mais nous arrivions à bien nous comprendre dans ce créole que nous inventions*" (2002: 142). In a web of global exchange, languages almost naturally begin to permeate each other. But in postmodern culture, nothing should be taken at face value: Ariane's relationship with language has metamorphosed like her self. She suddenly differentiates between the masculine and feminine, "*'Soleil' en allemand est féminin*" (2002: 125) she says wistfully.

Poitras transfers all linguistic angst to the immigrant. Miccone explains that the question of language in Québec has now shifted over to the immigrant. The 'reality' of Mino's life is in relation to language. Language initially leads him to Montréal: "*Premièrement, parce qu'on y parlait français et que mon oncle m'avait enseigné cette langue*" (14). Yet, Mino is the one who feels violated and resentful of language. His native language is Spanish, French is his newly adopted one and he is incarcerated in an Ontario Detention Centre. In prison, Mino is filled with memories of his childhood in another land. He experiences a feeling of nostalgia felt by many immigrants: he risks losing his memories and language, so he retreats into his daydreams trying to grasp what

remains. “*Encore l’espagnol qui me vient aux lèvres. Puis je réalise que non, il faut parler une autre langue, je fais un saut par le français et je m’éveille enfin complètement, je vois ma cellule et j’entends des gars discuter en anglais*” (43). He is disdainful of the English language’s global appeal, referring to it as “*une langue empruntée, passe-partout*” (44). Ironically, Poitras selects an English word uttered by the prison psychiatrist to best describe Mino: clever.

Postmodernists argue that there is a false sense of security in language, but Poitras uses language as the last bastion in her characters lives. It is the only thing that gives them any sense of security or being. No matter how far both characters travel, they return to their respective maternal language, essentially the core of their being. “*Entendre ma langue maternelle, parlée par ma mère en plus, me fait l’effet d’une caresse*” (15) murmurs Mino. Alone on a train travelling through Germany, Ariane takes comfort in hearing her native language, “*cela me faisait tout de même du bien d’entendre ma langue*” (127). In Poitras’s text, language tastes bittersweet: she captures a sense of belonging but also of being ripped at the roots.

Translating *Soudain le Minotaure* in the Age of Postmodernism

“Translation is a productive writing
called forth by the original text.”
Jacques Derrida

Throughout this discussion, I have exposed *Soudain le Minotaure* as a postmodern text that is already marked as a translation to demonstrate how this would influence my subsequent translation of it. If the text is an intertext, with traces of other texts, the text cannot stand in clear relation to any other text. Therefore its translation

cannot stand in clear opposition to the 'original', for how could there be any clear demarcations? In deconstructing the importance of the original, translation moves to the forefront, shedding its usual position as the lesser of the two.

Translation has been inferiorized mainly by the notion of meaning. The author traditionally controls the meaning(s) of their text and the translator is slavish to their meaning(s). Based on postmodern theories, I have disrupted *Soudain le Minotaure's* linear interpretation by displaying its multiple readings. My deconstructive close reading of the novel was done to purposefully expose meanings and elements that perhaps Poitras herself was not aware of. It also suggests that there was no specific set of rules I had to abide by as it shifted the hierarchy of the so-called original, giving me the freedom of interpretation.

As the reader and the translator, I am no longer a mere consumer of the author's intentions and meanings. The text is no longer the absolute source but a source that prompts a multitude of rereadings. Case in point: *Soudain le Minotaure* is currently being translated into Spanish by a Mexican publisher and into English by Montréal's Patricia Claxton and I do not expect my translation to mirror theirs, or conversely. The question therefore of how to be faithful to the original, how to translate it 'perfectly', becomes flawed.

Venuti reacted against the easy readability and smooth transparency of the Anglo-American translation which is, more often than not, the definition of a perfect translation whose sole goal is to give the impression of being the original. Rather than domesticating the foreign text, Venuti encourages the translator to adopt an 'abusive fidelity'.

As this 'unfaithful' translator, Venuti ensures that the translator cannot be accused of betraying the original text, because he does not betray its constitutive plurality. But more importantly, the faithful translation has died with the author. Venuti calls for the translator's visibility; he wants to construct a new translating subject which confronts the reader with the impossibility of determining with any certitude who has written the text – author or translator? (1995)

I aimed to deconstruct *Soudain le Minotaure*, break it open, seek out contradictions and possible blind spots rather than translating the text 'superficially', only paying attention to the words, sentence structure, punctuation and paragraphs, attempting to read Poitras's mind and recreate her style. This was necessary because if I were to view *Soudain le Minotaure* as a text with definite and identifiable borders, I would have never succeeded in unearthing its full potential and would have simply engaged in the seemingly effortless reproduction of the text.

Soudain le Minotaure is a text and within that text exist other texts. I had to deconstruct the text in order to rebuild it. To do this, I focused on themes in the novel that were particularly relevant in postmodern literature. This allowed me to explore every single nook and cranny of the text. Once completed, I could integrate these themes into the translation to shape my own original. This process leads me to the final product, but more importantly supports my translation decisions, which are appropriate for they are based on textuality as well as intertextuality.

I revisited the intertexts that weaved the novel to formulate my translation decisions. Literary translation is to search for the meaning of a text and by revisiting the texts that shaped *Soudain le Minotaure*, I, in turn, shaped the meaning of my translation. I

called upon my creative abilities to exploit the text to add to the target text, changing neither its meaning nor its tone, but rather enhancing both. My decisions were mediated by the type of equivalence suggested in the text and required in the translation.

For example, this excerpt is perfect in describing Mino as the Minotaur lost in the Labyrinth, roaming through the streets of Montréal, hunting down his prey.

Il tombait une poudre fine, ma première neige pour tout dire. Je mémorais le nom des rues au passage, n'ayant jamais mis les pieds dans ce quartier, et suivais Ariane, envoûté par sa démarche légère, éthérée. On errait tous les deux dans les dédales du quartier. J'aurais pu la dévorer de son vivant dans une des ruelles qu'elle connaissait bien. Lui apparaître, comme ça, annuler tous ses repères, l'attacher avec du fil et l'aimer à jamais dans une étreinte prolongée, interminable (2002: 31-32).

A powdery snow fell, my first snowfall in fact. I memorized the names of the streets as I walked by, having never set foot in this neighbourhood, and followed Ariane, captivated by her light and ethereal gait. We both **roamed** through the **maze** of the neighbourhood. I could have **devoured her alive** in one of the **alleys** she knew well. Appear before her, just like that, **unraveling** all her bearings, **binding** her with **thread** and loving her forever in a prolonged, endless **grip** (64).

I ensured that my choices were guided by Ariadne's golden thread, a reflection of the myth, and with that in mind, I translated the passage.

Another occasion where the intertext played a role in my translation is through Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. In the excerpt below, Ariane mirrors Kundera's literary melancholy: she has lost faith in mankind and questions her role in this world.

Je mets tous mes sens au défi en leur faisant subir un entraînement exigeant. Je me concentre et entends les clignements de cils de chats, les battements d'ailes des mouches et les cheveux tomber sur le sol. Je m'attarde à l'invisible: les détails des cristaux de poussière vagabondant dans le salon les après-midi ensoleillés, la couleur de l'eau et de l'humidité ambiante (151).

I challenge all my senses by subjecting them to a strenuous training session. **I concentrate on hearing the blinking eyelashes of cats, the flapping wings of flies and hair falling to the ground.** I dwell upon the invisible: the details of dust crystals vagabonding through the living room on sunny afternoons, the colour of water and the **enclosing** humidity (122).

It is the almost imperceptible facets of life that torment Ariane, not her aggressor. Ariane had to remain ethereal and vulnerable; every little detail she lingered over had to resonate loudly.

Lefevere comments that “translations are produced under constraints that go far beyond those of natural language – in fact, other constraints are often much more influential in the shaping of the translation than are the semantic or linguistic ones” (1982: 243). As such, my translation of *Soudain le Minotaure* is not simply a mere reproduction but a productive rewriting, displacing the belief that my English translation can only ever be a mere copy of the original.

The Translation- Excerpts

Berman believes that in translation one cannot and should not remain neutral. He suggests suspending any premature judgment to engage in a long and patient reading and rereading of the translation, leaving the original aside. The second reading of the translation allows the reader (translator in this case) to assess whether the target text is convincing; convincing as a written work in the receiving language, in other words, like a ‘real’ text. There are no conceptual dictionaries to assist the translator in awkward situations: the answers can only be found in the text and this rereading tends to unmask problematic textual zones. Either the translated text appears to suddenly weaken and lose

all rhythm: awkward words, phrases and sentence structures that clash. Or yet the text is invaded by references to the original language and is victim of the phenomena of linguistic contamination (1995). By unmasking these problematic zones, I was able to justify my translation decisions.

Venuti explains, “translation never communicates in an untroubled fashion because the translator negotiates the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text by reducing them and supplying another set of differences...” (2004: 482). These instances are about compromise and compensation. I’m reluctant to use the term ‘loss’ in translation; I prefer ‘displaced’ to describe my translation solutions. It’s a game of give and take: if I was required to remove style or meaning in one area, I took the opportunity to insert it elsewhere. A bit of abusive fidelity never hurt any reader of translation.

For example, below is an instance where I jumped at the opportunity to ‘displace’ the translation. Mino’s violent fantasies are frequently imbued with magical realism, an artistic genre often credited to Garcia Márquez, in which magical elements appear in an otherwise realistic setting.

Je chiquerai des organes vitaminés, encore frémissants de n’être pas tout à fait éteints (...) Depuis ma naissance, elles auront attendu ce moment ultime de fécondation. D’autres Minotaures s’élanceront hors des chairs de ces filles, **ouvertes par la force des choses**. Les ventres vides des gazelles **tuées** s’envoleront entre les serres d’oiseaux violents (40-41).

I will **gnaw** enriched **organs**, still quivering as they aren’t entirely extinguished (...) Ever since my birth, they have been waiting for this ultimate moment of insemination. Other Minotaurs will soar from the flesh of these girls, **inescapably laid bare**. The empty stomachs of **murdered** gazelles will fly away between the claws of violent birds (71).

The language had to remain fierce, yet magical, born from Garcia Márquez and translated into Mino Torrès. To do this, I selected the violent ‘murdered’ in lieu of ‘tuées’. ‘Gnaw’

is more animalistic than *'chiquerai'*. And *'inescapably laid bare'* delivers a more powerful image to the reader than *'ouvertes par la force des choses'*. This compensated for the instances in which only a literal translation could be used.

Poitras creates a few words which are very postmodern but difficult for the translator to match. *Des pillules anti-bandaison* (21) became *'anti-hardness pills'* (59). The word does not exist in English or French, but the reader can immediately grasp the meaning. *J'insomnieraïs dans un délire extraordinaire de puissance* (56) was far trickier, I settled for *'I'd be an insomniac delirious with extraordinary power'* (78). Poitras turns an epilepsy attack into a verb: *J'épilepse* (46) which I was unable to match and used the staid term *'epilepsy'* (73).

There were instances where I borrowed from other languages. In French, I kept the *accents* of words to firmly situate the reader, lest they forget, and the names of specific places, *Parc Safari*, *Coq Rapide*, etc. and of the characters. I also retained the German and Spanish in the text. I was adamant not to translate book titles, for example, *L'insoutenable légèreté de l'être* (61) and *Cronica de una muerte anunciada* (60), for these were perfect examples of translated texts.

I was challenged to find an appropriate translation for *Alex levé tôt avec tous les matins du monde'* (143), a beautiful French expression, and selected *'Alex rising with the morning glories'* (117): morning glories are vine shaped flowers that mainly open in the morning hours. Male friends assisted in this translation: *...à ne plus pouvoir se malaxer le dard* (21) to *'slap the monkey'* (59). And I wanted to keep the sonority of *écarlate et échevelé* (111) which became *'scarlet and scattered'* (95).

I did not adapt *la radio vomissait de la musique pop américaine* (14). Obviously, radios do not vomit, but I was intrigued by the imagery and that it expressed Mino's disdain for the English language, so I settled with 'the radio vomited American pop music' (55). Ironically, it was the simple play of the French verbs *partons, sortons* (119) that proved to be a conundrum. I rejected the obvious choices, such as 'leave, go' and finally settled on 'today we escape, we escape' (100) which are the lyrics to British rock group Radiohead's 'Exit Music (For A Film)'. I admit that this choice is highly debatable, but because I defended the use of intertextuality, and Poitras's love of popular music in *Soudain le Minotaure*, I felt I had an opportunity to add a dimension to the text to make up for what I had been required to abandon.

Translating Ariane and Mino

I had a tremendous responsibility towards Poitras's complex characters. She weaved such extraordinary characters, that I feared a flawed translation could possibly muddle their complexities. It is at this point that my critical reading came into play. Fully aware of the various texts that created as well as supported Mino and Ariane, I never, if rarely fell off course. I had to treat Ariane and Mino's parts individually by highlighting the differences between the characters, which could be something as innocuous as specific sentence structures or more intricate like moral values.

Ariane is obsessive in describing tastes, colours, smells, etc...blindfolded and the life nearly squeezed out of her, she no longer takes life's simplest pleasures for granted. For Ariane, Poitras's writing is particularly sensuous, symbolically encompassing all five senses. She is preoccupied with describing sensations and lifting her words off the page.

Mino's attack of Ariane is the longest chapter of the novel and the catalyst. This chapter is powerfully written with Poitras's words weighed carefully. Ariane is taking a gamble in reliving, poetically, the worst day of her life.

Poitras describes the attack in a vaguely detached style; however her style is controlled with precision: it is rendered like an out of body experience with Ariane watching the attack from afar. Poitras uses the French infinitive in this scene to create a sense of detachment, and to depersonalize the attack.

I sought to capture the distant, documentary-like tone used by Poitras.

Être astronaute et **échapper** sa bombonne d'oxygène dans l'espace. **Regagner** la fusée, mais n'**avoir** plus rien à inhaler. **Vouloir** attraper des poignées d'air, sans succès. **Être** désemparée et impuissante (117).

To be an astronaut and **drop** the oxygen tank in space. **Return** to the spaceship, but **have** nothing left to inhale. **Try** to catch fistfuls of air, unsuccessfully. **To be** helpless and powerless (98).

I chose to use 'do not' instead of 'don't' because it proved to what extent Ariane is trying to remain in control despite having none whatsoever.

J'ai les mains pleines de sang et **je ne veux** pas tacher mon édredon. **Je ne sais** que faire de cet orage de sang accumulé dans l'entonnoir de mes poignets (122).

My hands are full of blood and **I do not** want to stain my quilt. **I do not** know what to do with this storm of blood accumulating in the funnel of my wrists (101).

A particularly challenging translation was required for Chapter two. Ariane's wounds resemble food and I struggled to ensure that the English would retain this interesting description. This of course is a reminder to the reader that Ariane's senses have also come under attack and food is a pleasure she will no longer take for granted.

Avant de raconter la scène aux policiers, j'ai dû fouiller dans le dictionnaire pour connaître le nom des coups portés. Au moins, il y a de beaux mots: **trempe de talmouses (on dirait le nom d'un potage à l'émincé de crabe africain dans un grand banquet), horions et soufflets relevés de meurtrissures (comprendre sorbet citron-lime parachevé à la vodka), contusion du visage au complet, lésions de toutes sortes et le sang qui me pisse hors du nez (entendre médaillon saignant de veau attendri);** et pour désert, **des mots en 'ent': ébranlement, tamponnement, élancement;** ça y est, je me rends (**îles flottantes avec coulis de framboises**) (108-109).

Before relating the scene to police officers, I had to search the dictionary for the names of the blows delivered. At least there are some lovely words: **whipped clouts (you'd think the name of sliced African crab soup at a big banquet) punched face topped with bruises (imagine a lemon-lime sorbet with a finishing touch of vodka), entire face contused, variety of lesions and blood pissing out my nose (see tender rare veal medallion)** and, for dessert, **words ending in 'ing': shaking, colliding, slicing;** that's it, I'm getting there (**islands floating in raspberry current**). There, I've been cooked and now, my flesh will be devoured? (93-94)

Interestingly, it was easier to translate Mino's part. I am not a man. Nor a sexual predator. Nor an immigrant. I felt protected by a safe distance. However, translating Ariane's part was much more awkward. I am a young woman, a former literature student; I have lived alone in downtown Montréal. I felt Ariane's fear and pain and loathed Mino for it. I would have loved to step into his fantasies and turn them into living nightmares. But I've always been of the opinion that objectivity requires much more strength than subjectivity. Poitras, as the writer echoing various texts, did not go down that road: her objectiveness in creating Mino had to essentially become mine. He deserved to be heard, however vile, and Ariane deserved to be healed, however painful. Yet, as much as I tried, Ariane spoke directly to my heart. I carefully pondered her words and actions. I wanted her motto "*je suis l'héroïne. Je n'ai été que victime par défaut*" to resonate loudly.

I was constantly reminded that Mino is a misogynist and that his language had to reflect that character defect. Despite being uneducated, Mino is an avid reader which explains his poetic disposition and also the choices Poitras makes in selecting the language he uses. This allows me the opportunity to pick equally beautiful imagery in English. Mino's language as a sexual predator also plays an important thematic role in the novel.

- *Quand ça pleure trop, je n'aime pas* (22) - 'when they cry too much, I don't like it' (59). Unfortunately, I was unable to replicate the detached and inhumane *ça* that Mino uses for his victims. I did want 'when *it* cries too much' to be immortalized on the page but I felt it may be too powerful and perhaps confusing for an English audience; '*ça*' in French does not have a similar connotation to 'it' in this context. If I used 'it', Mino would have been completely devoid of humanity – but is that truly an unfair bias?

- *Quand j'ai accompli un viol* (28) - 'Once I've **accomplished** a rape' (62). I used the direct translation because for Mino, rape is indeed an accomplishment.

- *Dr. Parker me donne des comprimés pour calmer mes pulsions sexuelles* (12) – 'Dr. Parker gives me meds **to conquer** my sexual drive' (53). Mino is always struggling to retain his phallic power, so I took the opportunity to make this sentence more forceful by using 'conquer' instead of 'calm'.

- "*Les prendre ainsi me rendait euphorique*" (14) - 'to **take** them like that made me euphoric" (55) "Those who **take** girls by force..." (59)

Mino says 'prendre', he does not use the word 'rape' or 'attack' or any other word that would appropriately describe the forceful and violent act he inflicts upon women. Therefore, I selected the word 'take'. This purposefully downplays Mino's actions. 'Take' is inoffensive and does not connote any violence. You 'take' your child to school,

you ‘take’ milk from the fridge. Mino believes he has the right to ‘take’ any woman he wants. Almost as if rape is a give and take: they offer it up and he takes it.

Elle and She

The masculine/feminine of Poitras’s text is of great importance. For instance, Mino never uses the word ‘woman’ but always ‘girl’. ‘Woman’ would imply that he treats women with respect which is clearly not the case. Unfortunately, the English language doesn’t allow the gender of words to be highlighted.

I wanted Mino’s epilepsy attacks to remain feminine. The only time he ever loses control is during his ‘attacks’ – rape and epilepsy. It would also give the women in the text some poetic justice.

Elle monte en moi, je **la** sens. Je lui donne encore quelque minutes pour éclater. Je tremble, ma langue s’épaissit, j’ai la bouche pâteuse. Je halète un peu, **elle** tarde à se déclarer (45).

She rises in me, I feel **her**. I give **her** a few more minutes before exploding. I tremble, my tongue grows thick, my mouth is pasty. I gasp slightly, **she** delays in announcing **herself** (73).

I also ensured that Germany was feminine. The country is meant to represent Ariane, therefore it had to be female in nature.

Je découvrais en **Allemagne une terre contaminée** qui survivait à ses clochers évanouis, à ses camps de concentration qui faisaient pourrir les villes, à ses musées d’histoire qui commençaient en 1945 et un mur effondré, malcatrisé. J’apprenais **qu’elle n’était** pas seulement l’agresseur qu’on avait voulu **qu’elle incarne**. Elle avait aussi un côté meurtri, quelques plaies béantes nommées Dachau, Ravenbrusbrück, Sschsenhausen et Buchenwald (141).

I was discovering in **Germany a contaminated land outlived by her fallen steeples, her concentration camps** that rotted **her cities, her historical** museums introduced in 1945 and **her collapsed wall**, shoddily

healed. I was learning that **she was not** only the attacker that we wanted **her** to embody. **She** also had a wounded side, a few wide-open injuries named Dachau, Ravensbrück, Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald (114).

Ariane's 'victim kit' is obviously for female victims. Having to abandon the feminine gender for neutral words was unfortunate because the fear is definitely female. I had no choice but to add words:

Puis ma mère m'achète le kit de la victime (...) et une boîte noire semblable à un pager qui, lorsqu'on tire une corde, émet un hurlement strident – appelons-la **éminence-qui-gueule-à-la-place-des-filles-baillonnées** - membre moderne de cette famille de bidules pour victimes : **le sifflet de violée, le faux pager des baillonnées, le poivre de cayenne des apeurées** (la démarche rapide, agrippant une petite bombonne qui contient une impression de défense potentielle (130).

My mother then buys me the victim's kit (...) and a black box similar to a pager that, when you pull on a cord transmits a shrill wailing - **let's call it the power-that-screams-for-gagged-girls** - modern member of that family of contraptions for victims: **the rape victim's whistling, the personal alarm of gagged girls, the cayenne pepper of fearful girls** (rapid steps, gripping a small thingy that contains the impression of potential defence) (105).

Translation manifestly communicates the translator's interpretation. But basic elements of *Soudain le Minotaure*'s narrative have remained unchanged. The distinctions, mostly linguistic, had to be rendered comprehensible for the domestic audience. That is unavoidable for "translations (...) inevitably perform a work of domestication" (Venuti 1998: 5). But my 'domestication' of the text was in fact to preserve "in its own language the foreignness of the foreign text" (Berman 1985: 89).

Poitrass's text was originally written in French. Negating this fact would only weaken her text and as the translator, I would be naturalizing it, removing the particularities that shape *Soudain le Minotaure*. Perhaps her English reader will occasionally frown and be curious of the imagery conveyed in the translation. But that

was my goal. The ethics of difference that Venuti expounds so fervently (2004) exists for a reason. It is not for the translator to adapt and mould a text to be deemed acceptable by a culture. In a postmodern society especially, we are asked to step outside our cultural structure and acknowledge that our differences in fact create us.

Conclusion: A New World

Postmodernity is a cultural condition that can be likened to a labyrinth. It is a dislocated, stifling world comprised of an extraordinary complexity of paths where economic, political, social and artistic practices meet. It is a world where different discourses and ideologies dominate, intersected by different languages, races and cultures. All of which transcends the individual to find its own position in the world.

This 'lost' in a labyrinth view of the postmodern condition emerges as the perfect companion for translation. Translation and postmodernism live in a space of in-betweens: it is an area where it is difficult to determine the divisions between texts, languages, traditions and cultures.

No single framework, discourse or ideology dominates in postmodern society, therefore no culture or language has preference over the other. The translator's role can no longer simply be devoted to domesticating a text or worshipping the original when there are a multitude of paths to travel which will all lead to a successful translation. In postmodern terms, a successful translation is one that calls forth a productive rewriting through readings rather than simple reproduction.

Translators are adamant that their art should be perceived as a medium capable of redefining boundaries in literature and culture; thus for translation to reject its suspicious

nature it must find the way out of its self-erected labyrinth. Both Rilke and Benjamin insist upon this: “the process of translation is itself an act of liberation” (Blodgett 1983:32) which aims to bravely travel beyond its borders to a new world.

In a postmodern society, everything connects. Our lives are woven together in a fabric. The threads that bind postmodernism and translation have guided my translation of Poitras’s text. *Soudain le Minotaure*’s literary threads have been untangled and the conclusion of my literary translation project is the newly titled ‘Suddenly the Minotaur’.

Suddenly The Minotaur

A Novel

Marie Hélène Poitras

Translated into English by Maryse-Mylène Bélanger

PART ONE
Mino Torrès

*See he's coming
Am I here
I'm not running
I'm not scared*

*Big Black Monster
Take me with you*

*I'm not jerking
I won't hide
Yeah I'm ready
Meet the Monster tonight*

P.J. Harvey, *Meet Ze Monsta*

Chapter I

The only girl I see for the last six months, it's the nurse. A giant, twice my size. She checks my vital organs on a daily basis. I would gladly put her underwear over my head. She always looks down on me, straight in the eye, and I am naked and pink, a wad of chewing gum at the mercy of her heel. Before she turns up in the consulting room, I must take off my clothes and wait. It's always long. She's on the other side of the door, with one of the doctors, and sometimes laughs very loudly, a noisy and exaggerated laugh. She obviously wants me to hear her, that I know she truly enjoys herself while I'm stretched out shivering on the paper covered cot, like a foetus in a garbage can.

I know very well that on the other side of the built-in mirror, the nurse sees me removing my prisoner's uniform. I tell myself that it's of no interest to her, that surely, she must be into women, that she doesn't look at me. But when I remove my underwear, her big laugh soars towards me. The nurse then appears, her eyes still wet from having laughed so much. She looks intently at me, bitterly, and slips on rubber gloves that give off the smell of condoms. She then takes a mouthstick and orders me to stick out my tongue while saying 'aaaah'. She leans her heavy chest against my throat and, so that I don't get hard, I think of my mother or a field of sugar canes. In any case, for the last two weeks, I can no longer get hard: Dr. Parker gives me meds to conquer my sexual drive.

I often have the same dream. The prison's hallways are empty. All the inmates sleep in a medicated slumber, their mouths pasty. By a lucky coincidence, they forgot to lock the door of my cell. I don't escape; I wait for Nurse Smith. The distant sound of heavy heels, powerful strides and clanging keys: it's her. I smell her cigarette and the bitterness of her armpits. She looks into my cell and asks me why I'm not sleeping. I open the door abruptly, to hit her forehead. She falls, dizzy for a few seconds, and I climb onto her before she has the chance to gather her thoughts. I hold her wrists in one hand, solidly, and tear off her clothes with the help of the keys, until I see her large flabby breasts and her greying genitals. I thrust myself between her bovine thighs. She pants, groans and

comes, the lights of the hallway switch on and off frantically. We fall in love with one another, we leave the detention centre, and we jump into her car, a small forest green Rabbit covered in rust. I drive, she sews up her pants and we contemplate leaving Ontario to head all the way down to Virginia. She offers me a Marlboro.

Chapter II

Mama rang this morning. She thinks I earn a decent living here. My sister just turned sixteen and has been seeing, for two months, a thirty year old man who works in a bank and earns a good salary. I adopt a caring tone and urge my mother to be suspicious. She hands the receiver to Anna. "Sis, be very careful. I don't want anything to happen to you." I'm afraid for her. She knows nothing about men yet and sometimes dresses titillatingly. She wears tight t-shirts that reveal the upper part of her breasts. Her ass is wrapped in short skirts that expose her bottom when she bends over to rummage in her purse.

I raped at least twenty girls in Guatemala. One of them went to the police, but they never tracked me down. I'd been stunned at how easy it was. As if the girls expected to be attacked one day or another. Everything would happen very quickly. Soft hair trailing down the middle of their backs. Swelling hips. My hand over their mouths. Their eyes as unctuous as two coffee beans floating in cream. I wanted to exercise more power over them, but they let me take them. The terror in their eyes was intoxicating. I wanted to drink them in, it was as if everything was stretched out in slow motion. I was raping them and they were making love to me. I soiled their stomachs with my sperm. I spat on their heads as if to dirty them. Then I left running, promising myself that I would start over again. To take them like that made me euphoric. The first time, I was wearing a Mickey Mouse mask; Halloween was approaching.

A few days after that rape, I was troubled by an article in the local newspaper reporting the incident. After a day spent selling fruits at the central market, I came home a bit earlier than usual, with a pack of American cigarettes and two mangoes for Anna.

Mama wasn't there. My sister, who had skipped classes like she usually did when mama was absent, had brought home three little scumbags older than she. An open bottle of rum littered the table. The radio vomited American pop music, Madonna I think. My sister

danced, her arms in the air, which meant the bottom of her ass was clearly visible. From the window, I spied the scene for a few minutes. The guys downed the brown alcohol straight from the bottle, ogling Anna's body, while she twisted around. She seemed a bit drunk. The guys whispered in each other's ears and poured every so often rum in the cap, which they offered to Anna. She drank quickly and they applauded. It reeked of rape.

I entered yelling and threw a punch at one of the guys. A penknife fell out of his pocket. He picked it up and ran off with the two others. Anna began hurling insults at me, accusing me of never letting her have any fun, screaming, with fire in her eyes, that she wasn't doing anything wrong. I hit her over the head with the newspaper, not forcefully, only to hurt her pride and to finally shut her up.

"You don't read the newspaper, you?"

"What does the newspaper have to do with this. And anyway, you left with it this morning."

She was more drunk than I'd first thought. After lighting a cigarette, I showed her the article about the rape.

She stopped her high-pitched jabbering.

Over the phone, my mother cries and repeats that she is proud of me, happy to know that things are going well. She thinks that I work for a large Québec corporation, asks me about Maria. Hearing my mother tongue, spoken by my mother as well, has the similar effect of a warm embrace. She wants to know when she'll be a grandmother and tells me to hurry up, or Anna will have little ones before me. With a large stomach, Anna's skirts would surely climb up to the middle of her ass. In any case, I, would never rape a pregnant woman. "Son, your mother is getting old." I hadn't been listening to her for a moment. "Mama, I've got to go. I have to get to work." And I returned to my cell, Unit 303 of the Penetanguishene Detention Centre.

Chapter III

Three nights in a row, I headed to the university, corner of St. Denis and de Maisonneuve Streets, to watch the parade of female students. They were all very pretty, except a few fat and tall ones wearing track suits, with a bit of hair above their upper lips. I was sitting at a table, on the first floor mezzanine, and I surveyed the area where students gathered around a fountain. A tremendous desire to fuck turned my stomach inside out. You can find what you want in a girl. If a man has the urge to rape, she will give him the impression of being only good for that. Expecting it even.

My wife never had any orgasms and played dead during sex. I felt as if I was coming into a bag of organs. She didn't give a damn about coming, because the only reason she allowed me to take her, was her desire to become a little mother. She was bored, alone in the apartment. Everything was always very clean. She wrapped the lamps in clear plastic lining so they wouldn't get covered in dust. She longed to take care of a child, to be useful at something, to offer her breast to someone other than myself. I sold fruits and vegetables at the Jean-Talon market and we lived in an apartment in Montréal North.

The city was beautiful in autumn. I'd bought coats for Maria and I. She only went out in my company. We went to the market, she selected fruits, vegetables, fish and hanging meat while I waited for her in a small coffee shop reading the newspaper. She smiled, happy to have found citrus fruits from her native country, Costa Rica. I'd warned her that the city was dangerous for a woman alone and it was better if she didn't go out without me. Maria was very pretty, taller than I, full lips, golden complexion with long black hair. I knew she attracted looks and smiles. I could have been mistaken for her younger brother and it annoyed me.

On a red Monday in October, I came home from work around suppertime. We'd been in Québec since the month of September. Maria had gone to the hairdresser's. Alone. Her long black hair rested in a box, in the middle of the kitchen table, in a braid tied at the

ends by two red bows. Her hair cut like a boy's. A dribble of saliva oozed from her mouth; she had fallen asleep on the living room sofa during a children's programme. I left the apartment kicking at all the walls. I had to move, or else I was in for an epileptic attack. When I felt her coming on, I started to run and sometimes succeeded in escaping it. I jumped on a bus, whichever. I found myself in the Gay Village, I ran to get out quickly. Reaching l'Université du Québec, I understood that I would soon commit another rape, that there would be many others and that I would choose girls with long hair.

Chapter IV

I'm slumped in the corner of my cell while the other prisoners played pool or cards in the communal room. Those who take girls by force are roughed up by the other inmates, and the guards must isolate them. We are three neighbour rapists, digesting our mashed potatoes and our anti-hardness pills, no longer able to slap the monkey, the only possible diversion within these grey walls. I count my teeth, splash my face with water and scratch my ears waiting for the next group therapy session.

Dr. Parker tells us repeatedly until he is blue in the face that we are sick. I respond that it's because of the medication they give us. The other prisoners laugh a little. I'm the class clown and Parker passes off as an senile old man. One inmate adds that the meds raise his voice an octave. The only thing I learn here is English. I think in Spanish, in French also, but I must speak English, uprooted in my language as well.

I sometimes think of the girls I've raped. When I took the time to chose them, approximately seven times out of ten, they had this profile: thin, pretty, frail, hurried, adorned with long hair cascading down their backs, below the clasps of their bras, or tied in a bun against their skulls, straining their eyes towards the sky, displaying their white cheeks. Not one reacted the same way to my method, but they all were very frightened. As if a horrible beast was preparing to devour them. I raped thirty-three exactly, thirteen in Québec. They parade disorderly through my mind, like a sequence of small cardboard characters attached by the arms, one to the other. Two of them were virgins; my sister's friends. When they cry too much, I don't like it. There was also that girl who picked flowers near me, reading *Zorro*. I had told her that I knew a nice area, so invaded by roses that she would be the one picked. She had laughed. Her body was like a star-filled sky of beauty marks and she had purple nipples. One silly bitch observed the *tortugas* abandoning the ocean to lay their eggs on the beach. In a swimsuit with her long legs. Alone in the middle of the night. I call that an official invitation to rape. The gazelle that falls asleep on a lion's rump and is stunned to awake devoured. There was also that girl

who bought melons while smiling at me. In Montréal, it was nearly always students that I dragged into alleys. I'm forgetting many. But I remember Ariane perfectly.

I thought Ariane would be at the trial. She is the only one whose name haunts me. I was able to enter her home and wait for her, because the doors of her apartment were unlocked. I wiped my feet on the coir mat and explored the rooms. A guy obviously lived with her; pictures of girls taped to the walls of one of the rooms were proof. In the first drawer on the left of Ariane's dresser, several expired student cards revealed her name to me. In a series of three pictures taken in a photo booth at a shopping centre, two teenage girls pulled faces. I quickly recognized Ariane, even if the picture was old: she was on the left and had a blue tongue from god knows what. The fourth photo had been torn off. Maybe her friend had kept it. I hid in her closet and waited for her arrival. Finally footsteps in the stairs. A female voice murmuring something. It was her. I changed my mind and went behind the bedroom door. And then no, that didn't work; I returned to the closet. She searched for her cat in the stairs, I think. The heavy sound of a coat crashing to the ground. The noise of a set of keys thrown on a table. A bag crumpled into a ball. I already felt the adrenaline running down my spine: I'd have the courage to do it. Then Ariane entered calling a guy: "François, are you there?"

I nearly killed her with my fingers. She is the only one to have tried to escape. To have defended herself. Ariane would not get away. I hit her, I made her bleed, I wanted her to be afraid. I could finally add violence to my act, I did not have a choice. Ariane, the only one I can name. I'd hoped that she would be at the trial, because even if I'd been hard with her, it seemed to me that she would be able to understand my actions. She might even have a bit of compassion for me. Unfortunately, it's the other one, the last one, whose boyfriend I stabbed, that appeared, surrounded by family. She came over to spit in my face. A stupid cow, that one.

Chapter V

It must be early, 5 o'clock in the morning, I guess. I think of Maria, my urban bohemian, that long and fragile flower, uprooted. I know she has difficulty sleeping the last six months. Maria does not speak or understand English. She sometimes comes to see me here. She doesn't know about the rapes. I told her that I'd been selling a bit of drugs and that, in Canada, the punishment is severe if they nab you. Maria enters and searches for me, her eyes puffy. All the guys follow her with their eyes. My toes curl in my shoes, I scratch underneath the desk and Maria takes her place. Tall Jack, the one who beat me up because I took girls by force, can't help but ask Maria how she does it, a beautiful woman like her, to put up with a dishonest creep like myself. She wants me to translate. I tell her that all the prisoners find her very beautiful and a few aren't very subtle.

Maria, Maria. I pull the sheet over my head and murmur that name, chew it and blow it out. Her hair is slowly growing back, she has lost weight. Last week, her nails were painted blue. I imagine exciting scenarios that no longer have any effect on my body. I lie on my stomach and dream of the bedroom in our apartment, three quarters taken up by our very soft bed, covered in several heavy and soft blankets. By my side, a sleeping Maria, her breasts naked, wearing only small panties. I hear her faint breathing, I smell her girlish fragrance. If her hair was longer, I would cover my face with it.

Chapter VI

Parker spoke to me for an hour, at noon, after the group therapy session. I might be excluded because I refuse to collaborate and reflect upon myself, my actions and my 'disease'. I much prefer staying in my cell doing nothing rather than listening to the prisoners simulating their participation to the therapy and smelling the light perspiration of the doctor who is enthusiastically wasting his breath. I have no desire to play the circus animal. I'm not the one that's sick. Rather it's Parker who should commit the act. He must jerk off, at night, at home like a maniac, fantasizing about what we tell him during the day. Out of jealousy or desire, he crams meds down our throats that make it impossible for us to see the end of our penises. In the absence of possessing the courage to rape, Parker became a doctor for rapists. It was either that or gynecology, but this man is undoubtedly incapable of coming into contact with a girl's vagina without collapsing in anxiety. Calling us 'sick' allows him to rid himself of his guilt. He applies for grants, welcomes the country's most "sex and violence" rapists and hypocritically feeds the seed of his fantasies with our own sexual exploits under the pretense of being a good man who is sacrificing himself for the good of humanity, all while neutralizing his most abject layer.

During our discussion, he told me that I was 'clever'. I thought that the word meant 'coward' or 'idiot'. It rang hollow, amorphous and empty like girls' bodies after a rape. Once I've accomplished a rape, I quickly flee not to be spattered by the victim's disarray. I enjoy scrutinizing fear, the fear that replaces the surprise in her large vaporous eyes, but what follows, I don't want. Which is why I blindfold the eyes, tie the hands and cover the mouth of the girl. Not only so that she can't identify me at the police station, that she doesn't scream or defend herself, no: there's something else. During the first rapes, I wasn't as well equipped as I am nowadays. I frightened the girls and they let themselves be taken. I would look into their eyes trying to read what was written. At the end of my first rape, in Guatemala, I observed my victim's defeated expression. She gave a strangled cry and curled up to protect herself from me while looking at me strangely. She had brought her hands around her knees and I wanted to console her and drive her home.

In Montréal, I never let myself be burdened. The only thing that mattered was my rage, my actions, the course of events that I would weave. After a rape, I hurriedly left the area, the victim's state didn't have time to reach me. To my surprise, 'clever' meant intelligent. Parker admired me because I dared do what obsessed him. Old nutter, if only he knew.

Nature urges me to act. My impulses come from the centre of the earth. In a given space, prey and predator evolve indifferently. All foresee what is awaiting them and exercise patience before the equilibrium is ruptured. The male forces the encounter with the female. The prey knows that one day the Serpent's fangs will come bite into her sides, tear her tissues and open her flesh. Like two pieces of a puzzle, a tooth, a rib, a tooth, a rib, overlapping one onto the other, in a light grazing contact of enamel and calcium. Then comes the Serpent's uncoiling and the appeasement of the prey. Exhausted, the predator goes home, like a quiet sheep, however the gnawed beast rests on her back, nearly assassinated, punctured gashes, swept up by the breath of a vile wind, disgusted by the putrid emanations of coagulating liquid over her flesh: blood, pus, plasma, sperm, saliva. If Parker was a reptile, he would embody a crawling little grass snake, frightened by the shrews, biting into wood, frustrated by the spectacle of the enamoured grasp of a Serpent and a doe hare. Unaware of the pleasure of spilling your anger into something very much alive: a warm body, humid, open right before you. Awaiting release.

Chapter VII

I followed them one by one, more or less discreetly. Ariane, my thirty-first victim, walked past me, bumped my leg and, without even glancing in my direction, excused herself. I narrowly avoided being struck in the face by the loop of her backpack. We waited for the métro together: she reading a book and I, ogling the nape of her neck. The first night we met, I only wanted to know where she lived. *Station Pie-IX*, she finally got off. A guy coming out of the next carriage came over to chat with her. To avoid losing face, I went to buy a large roll of tape – it could always come in handy - and the cheapest newspaper at the station's store. I sensed that they had already slept together. There was barely any distance between their bodies and she had this habit of squeezing his arm every time her voice rose to emphasize what she was saying. Arms dangling, the guy seemed thrilled by Ariane's touches.

A powdery snow fell, my first snowfall in fact. I memorized the names of the streets as I walked by, having never set foot in this neighbourhood, and followed Ariane, captivated by her light and ethereal gait. We both roamed through the maze of the neighbourhood. I could have devoured her alive in one of the alleys she knew well. Appear before her, just like that, unravelling all her bearings, binding her with thread and loving her forever in a prolonged, endless grip.

I was an armed spy, an impatient animal preparing his attack, ready to explode like a bomb. Within me palpitated acid veins, crackling arteries, heart on fire, kamikaze lungs. With each breath, an explosion threatened to split me into a million pieces of flesh. No one knew where I was at that very moment. I crawled and hid, the knife tight against my stomach. I trampled over my tracks, imprinted in the fresh snow, to muddle its neatness. Ariane's were narrow, adorned with a half-moon heel. I was my own master. Everything was going well, the epilepsy stayed at bay.

The rape would take place the following day, on an unremarkable Tuesday.

Chapter VIII

Towards the middle of October, the moment when the night catches up to the day in Québec, I followed a girl without intending to, without even noticing. I was returning from work and it was Friday. I got off the bus, behind her. I was thinking of everything except that girl; I was eager to reach the apartment, to kiss Maria and offer her bananas from Costa Rica that I'd selected one by one in her honour. I was even beginning to let myself be seduced by the idea of having a child with my wife. Obviously, I was somewhat tired.

Ahead of me, the girl quickened her pace. Her behavior was becoming ridiculous, and that's what snapped me out of my daydream. She was walking very quickly, with her small heels echoing, clicking against the asphalt. Her disproportionately large ass was jammed in 'career-girl' beige pants. I was engrossed in my thoughts and accelerated my rhythm to hers, uncounsciously. I suddenly had the desire to run after her or get close and scream: "Boo!" The girl was terrorized and her terror sharpened my anger. She could feel me behind her, very near, maybe my shadow was ahead of her steps. Maybe my scent frightened her. I'd perspired a lot that day and I reeked of sweat. I should really take a shower before approaching Maria to make love to her. The girl crossed the street, like those reddish brown cows that criss cross the roads of Central America.

In her exacerbated state of paranoia, she was a potential prey. Her entire being screamed: "Someone rape me, once and for all, let's get it over with." Or maybe she had already been attacked. Whatever. That girl was an open invitation to rape, an omen of the other attacks to come. By playing the prey, she'd awoken the predator in me.

I put my hand over her mouth and I pushed her into an alley. I ripped off her clothes without bothering to undo the buttons. Her genitals were like dough in my hand. A cat looked at us. I asked her what she was studying, I don't know, to give her rape a personal touch. "Bio." What, I can't hear you, articulate, big fat cow. "Biology," she mumbled. I crammed dirt and grass down her throat. She was spitting and vomiting on the cement

when I penetrated her in one stroke. Two ants ran across her back. We were alone and it was too easy. The backs of her thighs were mottled with varicose veins. It was ugly. I bit her back until she bled, so successfully that I had a bit of her flesh on my palate. It tasted like the beef tongues that my father would make me swallow. Tongue on tongue, this is fucking stupid! Raping an obese girl, what a stupid bastard I am! I grabbed her ponytail and pulled it like she was a horse I was ordering to stop. Her little uptight bitch face that was imagining herself far away, very far away, was driving me crazy. I ejaculated directly in the crack of her buttocks, that would teach her to lug around her fat ass in such ridiculous pants. She wasn't moving, was no longer speaking, was letting herself be taken. I could have eaten her whole, piece by piece, and she would have let herself be swallowed while imaging herself elsewhere on a deserted island with Brad Pitt. Stupid cow! I picked her up then threw her in a bin. I hadn't even needed to take out the adhesive tape. The weapon in my pocket had stayed there during the entire rape. It was really too simple. I don't recommend raping an obese girl in a deserted parking lot. It's as boring and insignificant as pissing in a sewer on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

It was the perfect example of a non premeditated rape, inevitable, the one that unfolds, in fury, without warning, provoked by an exterior element. It could happen from time to time in an itinerary of rapes. It was surely a sign of good health.

Maria threw her arms around my neck. From the kitchen the smell of lemon-scented vegetables wafted. She looked a bit sleepy; she must have spent the afternoon dozing in front of television programmes in languages she did not understand. I told her a rapist roamed the neighbourhood and that a girl who worked at the market had been attacked. "She's now so frightened that she walks around with keys between her fingers to stab at the faces of men who want to take her." Maria seemed to find that terrible. I pulled out the bright bananas from my bag. Her scowl was transformed into a smile. In her high pitched voice, she began to laugh loudly.

I wanted her to never leave the apartment. She ran the danger of being attacked and, if that were the case, I would never get over it. Girls who are too beautiful should not

expose themselves to the sight of everyone: men see them, and become crazy. I would have given Maria anything so that she could remain happy inside. I ordered her *rompope* in a Mexican grocery store, I prepared *ceviche* and cocunut custard every Saturday, I brushed her hair a hundred strokes every night. I loved her. Yes, I loved Maria.

I always asked myself what occupied her thoughts. I managed to keep her in the apartment, but I would have liked to know what inhabited her. When I'd spoken about the girl who was raped while removing the bananas from the brown paper bag, her face flushed with joy within a few seconds. Did she feel threatened, did she have sympathy for that girl, could she care less, would she think about it again the moment I was gone? I wanted to install cameras in the apartment to see what Maria was doing during my absence, to hunt her down in her subconscious, sleep near her dreams, intrude into her memories and play an important part, know what crept into her nights and made her grind her teeth during her sleep.

Chapter IX

In a grating chorus, the doors of my cell slide on each side of the wall allowing me entry to the hallway leading directly to the common room. At the Penetanguishene Prison, it's recess for rapists and childhood killers.

In the big grey living room, two child molesters play pool. Four others play cards. I'm slumped in an armchair, powerless against an old Rubik's cube that is missing several coloured squares. Obviously, at 3 pm, there is nothing interesting on television. I watch a women's programme thinking that Maria would like it. Old Barbies and dethroned former top models play grand and sorrowful rich old ladies at the mercy of hunks with jaws as wide as toasters. They sigh, they throw tantrums, they find out that their mother is a traitor and they lose their fortune. They call me fucking faggot, and I change the channel.

Two toothless children are preparing a banana-ham-jujubes-parsley sandwich. I hear one of the pedophiles murmur to another that without teeth, it's even better. Disgusted, I zap. One bellows and one of the rapists yells at him "motherfucker, you could at least wait for their breasts to grow." A guard comes out of his booth, adjusts the set to the Documentary Channel and confiscates the remote control.

On the screen, a lion hides without hiding, behind lush soft green bushes. Afar, a slow shuffle is heard, transforming itself slowly but surely into a loud noise, the ground resounding enough to make the tall grass vibrate. The background noise nears; the stilted gait of the agitated galloping of a troop of beasts is clearly distinguishable. Standing on spindly legs, dressed in yellow, hair in spiraled corns, the gazelles run, hurried. In their eyes broken by the awareness of danger, the lion distinguishes fear and relishes in it. He salivates, contemplates a spectacle that awaits his entrance to give it any significance. The gazelles surreptiously stare into the eyes of the predator who, already, gathers his hind legs under his pale stomach, lowers his head and quivers, eyes alert. Finally he leaps, disturbing the smooth rhythm of a hoard of prey in flight. They break into a trot,

heads to asses, and resume their lively gait in two rapid queues, bypassing the lion. They know. He makes them wait, closes his eyes, and in a lively surge, bites one in the thigh. That one collapses, obliging her sisters to employ amazing feats to avoid her. It could have been another one. She was neither sick nor more fragile. With heavy eyelids, a mid-sized gazelle fallen to the ground languishes waiting for the opening of her flesh like a brown paper bag.

Chapter X

When my uncle Tio taught me to read, I had just turned eight. He'd told my father to stop hassling me with the cattle and to send me to school. They'd fought and rolled into a pile of manure. They began laughing and, from that day on, I spent my mornings reading and my afternoons milking. We read *Cien años de soledad* for a couple of years. There were approximately thirty stories in one. My uncle brought coffee, I'd melt sugar in it. We dipped pieces of dry bread in the steaming liquid and this ritual made me euphoric. My mother took care of the baby and my father sweated like a pig in the stable while I read.

Coffee, books, insomnia and a hard-on pointing towards the sky: all this happened at the same time in my life. My nights were travelled by women with round asses, by wild girls directly exiting the forest with their hair full of insects, crazy eyes that frightened me and triangular breasts enticing the sky just like my cock.

One could believe that my uncle held all the stories of the world. We read, yes, but he also told me some passionate stories, taken from his own life experience. I believed for a long time that he was a writer himself, but that his right arm destroyed by a piece of shrapnel prevented him from holding a pen. He told me about the war. I learned about literature and politics. I no longer slept because I preferred thinking about all these new things that pranced around my head.

Still today, the moment they lock me in my cell, I stretch out on my bunk, my arms under my head, and my imagination is triggered into action. Ariane returns to my thoughts, then Maria, Anna, Nurse Smith, and the other raped girls. I am a child, a baby, fancy that! Wrapped in blankets, set down at the bottom of a bamboo crib, surrounded by girls who admire me. I blubber a bit, Nurse Smith's flaccid nipple is thrust fully into my mouth and I quench my thirst. Generous breasts watch over me, see to my happiness, fuss around the crib, lazy breasts that follow the girls movements, in half-second intervals. One changes my diaper, the other cooks, they cuddle me, bring me to the river, always curled up against ample chests. We are in the middle of a quiet clearing. From a pot the aroma of

tomatoes, pepper and meat wafts. Around us, gazelles and antilopes graze, waiting resignedly to be devoured. I, the deformed animal-child, I will orchestrate the carnage. Purple muscles will snap and die between my teeth. I will gnaw enriched organs, still quivering as they aren't entirely extinguished. Once fully satisfied, I will straddle gaping open asses, useless, adorned with wounds that never healed. Ever since my birth, they have been waiting for this ultimate moment of insemination. Other Minotaurs will soar from the flesh of these girls, inescapably laid bare. The empty stomachs of murdered gazelles will fly away between the claws of violent birds. Their light bones will roll wherever the wind will take them to later enrich subterranean grass and life, already feeding their palid bodies.

The noise of keys in the lock pulls me out of this daydream:

“Torrès, Mino, come here.”

Chapter XI

I don't know where I am. I sometimes wake with the certainty that Maria sleeps by my side. I murmur in Spanish. Always when waking, upon hearing the wired doors opening to let through the first inmates into the hallway, I believe that I am in Guatemala, near the Interamericana, and big trucks vibrate our house. My mother who prepares the coffee, Anna who applies her make up in the bathroom, the radio that crackles, little spiders on the ceiling and a lizard descending the length of the wall. Again Spanish springs to my lips. Then I realize - no, I must speak another language, I leap towards French and awake completely, I see my cell and hear the guys talking in English. Reality hits me on the head, like a fly suddenly crushed in my eye.

Apparently they will return me to where I came from, after my sixteen years in prison. It's nearly six months that I've been here, caught between tall tiresome walls. I have the feeling of being out of bounds, in a non-country, and speaking a borrowed language, all-purpose. I've even forgotten the name of the detention centre where I find myself, a word that sounds like a prisoner puking his guts out.

I'd chosen to immigrate to Montréal for several reasons. Firstly, because they spoke French and my uncle had taught me that language. The moment we'd finished reading *Cien años de soledad*, we read it again but this time in French. Indeed I was certain that was the only book that existed in the world, written in thousands of languages and that it could be reread to infinity since, in any case, we had forgotten the very beginning, read two years earlier. Afterwards, my uncle had me read only in French. We even ended up reading poems filled with women who were magical lesbians. Québec, however was closer than France, if I wanted to return to my country. I'd read somewhere that Montréal was a cosmopolitan city and I told myself: "Maria could very well make some Latino girlfriends."

Raping had become too easy in Guatemala. At that point, I was an aggressor of intermediate caliber and I wanted a bit more of a challenge. I'd heard that girls in Canada

were free, they attended university, they were politically motivated, wrote books, basically did like men, really. I wanted to wilt a white liberated woman, rebellious, intellectual and beautiful. I would smack her around and she would finally understand the laws of nature.

In prison, there are only two possible activities: watch TV or dream. My dreams are the only things that truly belong to me. There are the wide-awake dreams that are slightly forced, and the others, asleep ones, those that are lodged in the depths of sleep. The latter are more turbulent. We fall madly into infinite holes, the people that surround us are interchangeable, we are as light as bubbles. Awake or asleep, in dreams, we are always the focal point, the turntable of unravelling events. Through us, everything happens. We possess within ourselves the continuation of events and we can decide to end it when we wish.

The prison guards don't like the inmates to dream. Everytime I do, early or late, I hear the noise of keys in the lock of my cell and a big surly guard pulls me out of there, without any reason. I want to rape a deaf girl. She would be strong and would struggle against me. Deprived of a reedy voice. Before fear appeared in her eyes, she would demonstrate her martial arts technique, in silence. Female voices horrify me. They drive me mad. The shriller their octaves, the more I would twist their arm. Every woman that speaks is torture to me. She would nearly get away, but I would brandish my weapon and then at last, she would be frightened and spread her thighs. I would make her come then her voice would return, so I would stab her. That's how it would happen.

She rises in me, I feel her. I give her a few more minutes to explode. I tremble, my tongue grows thick, my mouth is pasty. I gasp slightly, she delays in announcing herself. My body grows hot. Like a tidal wave that emerges from the middle of the ocean and comes along to destroy everything in its path. My lungs contract and my sides stretch out, my ass cheeks are clenched, my body is a war zone, a minefield. Finally, epilepsy conquers me!

Chapter XII

Blockbuster membership, coupon for a free coffee at Second Cup, movie ticket stub, business cards from *Fromagerie Hamel*, from a Greek bakery on Saint-Laurent Boulevard, a Mexican restaurant menu folded in four, a few tokens to indulge in video games at *Palais de Cristal*, bag of hashich, twenty dollars, a bill for a coat, a Bell invoice and Ariane's secondary three ID card, with her little slutty expression of cheerful perversion. Three police officers spread out everything that was in my wallet onto the kitchen table, as if that was more proof of my guilt. A smell of poached sole pervaded the room.

Noticing the three police cars from the window, I realized I'd dropped my wallet at one of the loved-raped girls. I ordered Maria to go into our bedroom and, to reassure her, I told her that my wallet had been stolen at work, that the police officers believed to have discovered the kleptomaniac's identity, but they were first leading an investigation.

I was almost relieved that they'd stopped me. I think I would have continued to rape at a frenzied rhythm. The victims appeased me, I ran desperately towards them, they haunted me then abandoned me, it then had to resume, like a play repeated to infinity, stimulated by the improvement, the adjustment of details that were missed at the beginning, the ease acquired in the movements, the fluidity of sequences, the growing confidence, the bitter pleasure of giving the gift of fear.

I felt the leaded metal of the handcuffs encircling my wrists. "You know how this works, don't you?" the fat detective spat in my ear. I'd tied the ankles of the last two victims with handcuffs (too large for their fragile hands, docilely offered). I hoped to fall asleep and more or less felt the effects of the blows hitting my torso, the hand squeezing my jaw, the bouncing rubber of a club over my limp hands.

Maria screamed, cried. They brought me to a car, under the intrigued stares of my neighbours out on their balconies for the occasion. The smell of scorched fish followed

me, my wife threw onions at the police officers, crying in a terribly vulgar Guatemalan slang, lost in the dry air of a merciless November.

I was numb to the scene as if facing the spectacle of a beautiful blind girl searching for her reflection in the mirror.

Never would I rape a blind girl. We can see many things in the eyes of a girl we take. It unfolds in a sequence of three phases. First, surprise. The girl is not truly suspicious. Ariane had even laughed! (But Ariane, is Ariane.) The best is yet to come. It must be closely watched because the moment is ephemeral, like the green ray at the end of a sunset. We then see, in their eyes, savage fear, terror, panic. From that moment on, it's as if they'd already agreed to be raped. We control them totally; they surrender. We can do what we like with them, no resistance is offered. Yet, with Ariane, the scene was acted out differently. I felt shame before her. I looked stupid because she wasn't afraid. She was not playing her role of prey, didn't seem to understand what was happening. It's for this reason that I beat her so much. She had to understand that I was dangerous. Thirdly – I view this stage as horrific - all the sadness and pain of the world fills their gaze. I blindfold the girls not to have to swallow this horrific vision that kills me. Their stare reminds me too much of Maria's begging me to make her a child. In any case, after ejaculating, I wait three seconds and I run off.

Chapter XIII

My deep cough imitated the lament of a forlorn beast calling out to her fellow creatures in vain. Or the wailing of a mammal that digests her young after swallowing them to protect them from a predator. I had, for the first time in my life, a winter cold, and we were right in the middle of the trial.

From my bronchial tubes, salty secretions waltzed all the way up to my tongue. I glared at a glass on the desk, empty for a long time already. Sensing the surge of a coughing fit, I drank the lawyer's. I paid little attention to his defence; I plead guilty for three rapes and two attempted murders. It would all end badly one way or another.

The third victim was there and looked me up and down, satisfied at having spat in my face, surrounded by her family. They called me 'mister' and addressed me formally all while accusing me. I prefer police brutality to judiciary hypocrisy. Every time I heard my name, I stopped coughing, came out of my languor, turned towards legal aid and faced the look of rage of the one whose home I'd dropped my wallet. She was not testifying: she was there and glared at me.

I felt uncomfortable. Not because of what I had done, no, but because of that look she threw at me and that pierced through me like a sharp object. Her eyes were drained of fear; she was no longer offering herself to me defencelessly. Behind her, there was the family and the stabbed lover. More tempered, their eyes mirrored the same mixture of hate and contempt. To them, I personified evil.

I hoped to see Ariane arrive. That she strolls into court and sees me like how it should be, without tape over her eyes. Her roommate was there alone and I amused myself at staring at him. He avoided my glare, lacked courage. Ariane understood the reasons behind my actions. Perhaps she even had a bit of compassion for me. There was, in her bedroom, a large closet. I'd hidden, sitting on two cardboard boxes, wary of the skis that threatened to topple over me. On the shelves, coloured flasks, perfume samples, books and

magazines were piled up in a real girly disorder. Broken tapes and frayed scarves, ski boots, laundry detergent, a wig, an old dusty computer, an empty bottle of Porto and a half-open box of chocolates containing colouring crayons. The legs of a clown costume hung over my shoulders. A pink outfit with white polka-dots. I'd hoped to find the necessary courage to pounce on Ariane. I had to. Otherwise I would have left the closet when she went to the kitchen or to the bathroom and I would have fled. Her cat came to sniff me. She appeared suddenly...and we know what followed.

At about 10:15, we took a break and the lawyer bought me a box of cough drops, explaining that things were going rather badly for me, I would probably get 15 years in prison, at the very least. That day, I couldn't give a fuck. Aching, exhausted at having spent a night coughing, the prospect of having permanent access to a bed and not be obliged to go to work pleased me greatly. Perpetual rest was the only solution that was suitable to the accumulation of fatigue that I felt in all of my body's joints.

If I could have died on the spot, I would have.

Chapter XIV

Yellow lines punctured the highway. I counted them rapidly, imagining my mother's needle sewing the hem of a pair of pants. Everything was going very fast. From that point on I focused on the lampposts travelling at the same speed. Once in awhile, a road sign bled the sky and howled unknown directions. I fell asleep like a rape: full of fury. The car's motor rocked me lamely. I would have wanted for that moment to last forever, but I would have passed out without knowing if I was sleeping or dying, exactly like my epileptic fits.

Ariane was like a fish I'd pulled out of sea. I'd never seen anyone trash about in that way. She was prettier than the teenager on the ID cards. Ariane is the opposite of Maria; Ariane is life, Maria, death. With Maria, the best thing, is to sleep. She massages your back and at times sucks you to wake you. If only I could spend a night with Ariane, I would inject something in my veins and I'd be an insomniac delirious with extraordinary power. I nearly killed Ariane with my hands, but she was the one who deserved to live the most. In her bookcase, there were two Gabriel García Márquez novels: *Cent ans de solitude*, but also *Chronique d'une mort annoncée*. I came to Montréal to rape Ariane. She was the beautiful literate white girl that wouldn't be taken alive. She did not understand why I was there instead of spreading her thighs and offering herself to me so that I can take her, that I control her, that I direct the scene until the end. She wanted to flee, tried to strike me with the strength she had left. I'd never imagined that things would unfold in that manner. In front of her, I couldn't get hard. Even less than in front of the two police officers who accompany me. Ariane, Ariane, Ariane. Her name resonates in my head and swings between my temples. I respect her and I know that she thinks of me at this moment.

The two police officers cast triumphant glances in my direction. I can very well imagine the banality of their everyday life. For them, I am the evil one that they captured and caged. They are proud of this and will tell the story to the missus who will swoon over their virility. They'll secrete a child, to convince themselves of their love.

As for myself, I will have acted. I will have had a grip over my life, over Ariane's and many other girls who passed by me at the right time. "Container pierced with holes and used to filter liquids summarily," that's a colander. I learnt the word when working at Jean-Talon market. "Apples must be washed. Use the colander," said Pierre, another vendor. I looked it up in the dictionary that very night when I returned home. I'd said to myself that maybe Pierre had raped a girl. The girl who delivered bread in her big truck, spread out on the round moist loaves and the hot French baguettes. Or maybe the girl that often smiled at us when buying strawberries? In the end, there wasn't a great difference between girls and colanders.

Chapter XV

“Our society has made of man an active warrior and, of woman, a passive comforter and nurse. This vision of things must change, these traditional roles should no longer serve as models. We must recognize sexual equality,” Dr. Parker witters on. I can’t stand being preached at. Parker is a conquistador; he tries to convert us, to trample on us and to evangelize to us, to instill in us the common sense of his morality. The only rule that I obey, is to have none. If I hadn’t strangled Ariane, I would have collapsed in shame. She led the game. In her eyes, there was amusement, incomprehension, many bizarre things. Ariane was perhaps too accustomed to kindness. Me, I was violent, armed and fearsome: to survive me, she had to understand that she wasn’t dealing with a fool.

I will not explain to Parker why I rape. “I’m not doing your homework for you,” I told him. That, didn’t bode very well for me, I think. I hadn’t known what a rape was until reading *Cronica de una muerte anunciada* by García Márquez. I didn’t understand what was happening. My uncle was stunned by that and we began talking about girls. I’d been with Maria for a few years and we rarely made love.

“To rape, is to take someone by force,” Tio explained to me, moving away from the sink. “Ah, all right! Then I was raped by *putas* on a volcano?!”

He laughed a great deal and told me how, during the war when he commanded as Chief Warrant Officer, women would also be under fire. Tio and his soldiers walked over parched grounds strewn with inert bodies. In old shacks, they would sometimes find a thin woman with a child. Did she ever get it! The entire pack would pay her a visit. After their stopover, nothing remained of those two. From that moment on, my uncle set about turning me into a man. He would lend me his truck and his gesture meant: “Go get yourself a woman.” When they’ll return my freedom, I’ll still long to thrust my rage in girls’ bodies, more than ever, no doubt. There will be many attacks, because all this potential bitterness and all this boredom that I already have grows in prison and will have to be ejected from me.

This afternoon, on the Documentary Channel, they presented a report on Central America's large volcanoes. I was thirteen years old the first time I thrust myself into a girl. It was near the Arenal volcano, in Costa Rica. My friend Manuel's father was heading there to drive back a convoy of sheep and we climbed aboard, Manuel and I. He left us at his sister's and would return for us a few days later. Eduardo, his twenty year-old cousin, had just bought a car and wanted to take us to San José to spend the night. Down there, they were celebrating because the elections were coming up. People were dressed in green and white or red and blue, depending on their political allegiances. Eduardo bought us a bottle of sugar cane alcohol and we drank in a park waiting for him to return from a discotheque. I downed so much *cacique* as what was happening around me was dazzling. The ground was littered with streamers, garlands and red, white, green, blue confetti. Three men were fighting unconvincingly. The children who bummed cigarettes off us were settled under a bench, their noses in a bag filled with glue. Squatting on one of the candidates' scrawled signs, two dogs fornicated; the male, rather minuscule, trashed about as if his life depended on it. He thrust himself into a large beast that seemed oblivious to his straddling.

"You want a stuffed pomelo?"

Maria and her little sister Lorenita were selling fruits and flowers.

"You cut the pomelo in two and you find sweets inside: syrup, candied fruits, a bit of honey, crispy bits. It's my mother who makes them and everyone wonders how she empties them to later fill them without it showing. It's a secret. Look. If you find it, I'll give it to you."

I poured a bit of alcohol for Maria in a cone shaped hat. We ate a pomelo. Her sister went to join the children under the bench. I didn't know where Manuel was and I couldn't give a fuck. To be honest, I was beginning to get drunk. I kissed Maria's neck and we went under a tree. We rolled in the confetti like it was snow. Eduardo arrived honking his horn like a maniac. There seemed to be five people in the car. "Mino, come here, and I swear

that this will be the best night of your life,” Eduardo called out with an enigmatic smile. Manuel was already aboard. I wanted to bring Maria and Lorenita, but Eduardo scowled, as if annoyed. “Where do you want us to put them? On the roof?” I asked him to give me two minutes.

Maria replaced the tray of pomelos around her neck, searching for the clasp, lost in the thickness of her hair. “I will do everything in my power to return to this park tomorrow afternoon,” I swore to her. I left her the bottle of alcohol asking her to drink a toast to my health. She laughed, her pink tongue and her scent of citrus fruits delighted me. Her sister arrived, smelling like glue, and I then joined Eduardo and Manuel in the car thinking about how the only thing I disliked about Maria, was her height. Standing, she was a bit taller than I.

On the backseat, Manuel and I were wedged between two women. Eduardo and his friend Leandro said they were bosom buddies. I asked Leandro if they were his mother’s friends because I didn’t know them. He shoved a cigarillo in my mouth and told me that in thirty minutes these women would be my best friends and that I wouldn’t want to part with them. There was a generous bust on my shoulder and this bosom reeked of perfume. They played with my hair and I imagined that it was Maria.

We drove towards the Arenal. Leandro studied natural sciences and worked in the field. The volcano was occasionally dangerous, but not at that moment. Incandescent flows formed on the North side, to be avoided, but we were heading towards the South side. In a violent surge, the monster eructated fiery stones and spurted flames. As we ascended, the trees grew smaller and their leaves became large like umbrellas. Elated, Eduardo screamed how life was beautiful.

“Manuelito, Minolito, this is the most beautiful day of your lives!” He said while stopping his vehicle, the radio played on.

Eduardo and Leandro made the women dance. We observed and did the same thing awkwardly. They were much taller than us. I would have wanted to experience this all with Maria. Conchita had a beard and a little downy mustache. Her eyebrows met, it was nasty. All her skin was flaccid and her big slack mouth frightened me. Her hanging tongue, her thighs, her swinging calves and her breasts larger than her head: Conchita's body was like a labyrinth in which I had no desire to get lost. I wanted a citrus flavoured cat's tongue, pointy teeth, lively eyes, a slightly torn dress. No mustache and no hair. Behind us, the volcano spewed.

What was under her skirt resembled a dead animal, a disemboweled groundhog. Leandro rolled in the grass with Conchita, while Eduardo let Victoria lick his penis on the roof of his car. Maria inhabited me, hunted me down, I felt that she could see me and I looked at the Arenal instead of the women, because I was ashamed. What I was doing was dirty. I wanted to leave, but I was trapped on that volcano. A phrase kept popping into my head, like the chorus of a song: "You want a stuffed pomelo?" My fruit merchant had a beauty mark right under her eye.

They opened their legs. Eduardo and Leandro had bet on Manuel and me. We took our places before the start of the race. Leandro was on my side. It was the Leandro-Mino team astride Conchita against Eduardo-Manuel and their horse Victoria. I didn't want to be there. Manuel reached the finish line in less than a minute. As for myself, I felt as if I was drowning in an open wound, falling into a sea of tepid flesh. I looked at the volcano, Conchita's immense breasts, the phosphorescent crackling propelled out of the Arenal's mouth, I heard Leandro's bawling, Conchita's moans and did everything in my power to avoid her eyes.

All my muscles had stiffened. My movements appeared ridiculous, repetitive and warranting anger. I had the feeling that it wasn't exactly how it should be done. That I performed like a lizard, that I moved in the middle of the body like a twisted swing. Conchita was like a slaughtered animal expelling her last breath.

The hair on her throat that she unscrupulously displayed. Her eyes rolled upwards, enough to frighten. And Maria who must still be selling candied fruits in a chaotic park. I thought of things to forget my penis swallowed by Conchita's stomach. It seemed to me that I had reached a point of no return. I continued and went nowhere. I thought of other things to anesthetize these sensations. It was too intimate to be spread out in full view of Leandro, Eduardo, Manuel and Victoria who straightened her skirt, nearby. My entire body was swollen, rivers of blood flooded my veins, in big waves, irrigating my penis. It seemed to me that the spectacle would continue until infinity. I was going to be sick.

I suddenly pulled out crushing Conchita's little finger, and I vomited in a bush. Eduardo and Leandro told us to get into the car, curtly. During the return trip, no one said a word. Eduardo regularly spat out the window. Leandro raised the volume of the radio. The scent of women disgusted me. They got out in downtown San José. When paying them, Eduardo made excuses, he said he thought we were men, but that, finally, we were still children. Victoria fixed her hair while chatting and Conchita outlined her lips in red. We drove by the area where I'd met Maria.

The park was deserted and worn out, like Conchita's vagina. A dog sniffed a garbage can. If I hadn't been so drunk, I would have been enraged. The fields of sugar canes paraded on each side of the road for a long time, in silence.

I woke up the following morning, in the middle of the afternoon, with the feeling that I'd dreamt a lot, a feeling of shame doubly sustained by the memories of Maria and Eduardo, and a burning penis. A racket came from the kitchen: the grandmother had died during her sleep. "Go wake him up," cried Manuel's aunt in tears. Eduardo stormed into the room where we slept and opened the curtains in an authoritative way. "You wrap this strip around your cock and you get up. Abuela is dead." Manuel sat up in his bed, wincing while grabbing hold of the roll of gauze and he left the room. An hour later, the house was empty.

I had my breakfast while watching TV in the living room, next to the old woman's body laid out on the buffet. I'd prepared a plate of fruits to wash my mouth in anticipation of my date with Maria. I chewed for a long time on small juicy lemons, I covered my gums with slices of melon and scrubbed my teeth with orange peels. My penis burned, so I let it hang in a glass of hot water hoping the pain would pass.

I took my shower and scrubbed my penis screaming in pain: white and hard beads pierced through my already raw skin. I wrapped my penis in the gauze that Manuel had forgotten near Abuela's bath, I slipped on clean clothes then, bypassing the feet of the dead woman that jutted out past the buffet, I left the house.

I made the trip by bus. I must have waited for Maria for an hour. The park had been cleaned and the previous evening returned to mind in strange flashes. I now knew what a girl was. It could be a mixture of sweet fruits, sharp teeth, fragile caresses, timid kisses and drugged up little sister; or then again a large slack vagina riddled with holes, aggressive perfume, noisy earrings, lipstick on Eduardo's penis, open legs waiting without saying a word spreading mini-volcanoes that itch. Woman was a being that I could now judge: she was pretty and fragile or venal and cynical.

The humid muzzle of a dog woke me up, followed by Maria's crystal-clear laugh. From that day on, she never left my side, unless when I work or when I rape. Manuel's uncle returned from his voyage to the South of the country to attend the funeral and we stayed in Costa Rica for two weeks. I was always with Maria; Manuel and his family seemed to be under such a state of shock over Abuela's death to be concerned by my absence. The boils erupting on my penis ceased at the end of ten days. Maria came with me to Guatemala and we got married at the age of seventeen.

PART ONE

Ariane

I'm still alive

I'm still alive

I'm still alive

Tori Amos, *Hotel*

Chapter I

Hamburg was spread out before me, legs wide open. From a tower, I noticed the neon signs of the sex shops, awakened one after the other with the setting of the sun. My forehead glued to a bubble window, I witnessed, amused, the birth of alarming yellows, tawdry pinks and flashing greens, excited by their own automatic motions. A boy flung himself into the wide open from the end of an elastic cord slicing the panorama in a vertical line. My gaze followed his rise and fall, his coming and going less and less spectacular, his arms always very straight cutting through the air and flouting at the weight of a sky split open. Six churches, several with steeples truncated by the bombings during the war, were as erect as aroused genitals, exposing to me the power, the opposing strength of a fragile Germany. Since the previous November 4th, I had a premonition of signs of excessive desire wherever I laid my eyes.

A French tourist asked a bell boy what exactly Hamburg celebrated on May 7th to explain all the hustle and bustle in the port. "The city celebrates the port's anniversary, commemorating Frederick Barbarossa's concession, in 1189, of the right to freely navigate the Lower Elbe. The exercise of that right, threatened by piracy and feudal claims of other bordering riversides, Denmark in particular, required surveillance from town authorities which was only withdrawn by the 17th century," this was all presented in impeccably articulated language. "Navigating these waters in complete freedom, sheltered from pirates, leads to suspicion," he added directing a discreet smile at me followed by a professional glimpse.

I walked towards the port spying a nymphet and her dishevelled dog. Snub nose, straddling high heels with some dignity, Lolita wrestled with a multicolour jawbreaker and played the seductress by throwing inviting glances at the marines. The candy foamed at the corner of her lips, on the way she picked flowers that delighted her for the pleasure of creating the most odd of bouquets when suddenly, a mother's voice rang out: "Hildegard!" She abruptly stopped her immense beast and her tight turquoise pants

revealed the body of a child. Lolita turned around burying her bouquet in my arms and like a little wet frog, rejoined her mother.

Anchors weighing three times my weight trailed their shadows alongside ships.

On holiday, when I get hungry, I sometimes cast my gaze across the crowd or on the patrons of a restaurant, point at someone, randomly, and tell the waiter: “The same as that man over there.” At the end of the meal, I ask for the name of the dish and discover something new. That night, I singled out a gruff marine, with a scarlet face. I expected to eat meat or fish, something high in protein chewed loudly, gulped down with wine that stains.

A distinguished woman with swaying hips made her way towards a green painted kiosk. Intrigued as to why she would possibly want to be engulfed in the port before heading off to the theater or a concert, I abandoned the marine and reoriented my gaze towards the woman with orbital hips. I waited patiently behind her, deeply inhaling the honey fragrance of her perfume and I set off with my rum cappuccino and my eel soup as well.

Big overturned cans, exhaling salty odors, served as tables. I plunged my spoon into the green-gray stock that perplexed me and rolled the eel over my tongue, stunned by its velvety texture and its discreet taste, my teeth then tore through the piece of milky white flesh. A man in his fifties spied my body and smiled. His eyes navigated the contours of my curves, vagabonded over my entire being, capsized over my thighs, preventing me from concentrating on the subtle taste of the sea serpent soup. Ignoring him was pointless; he seemed on the verge of approaching me. I turned towards him and stuck out my tongue, revealing fish mush and other fish bones that his insistent presence prevented me from savouring. He retreated while I swallowed the first sips of my piping hot coffee.

In my bag there was men’s clothing. Before I left, my brother’s girlfriend gave me a hat, sunglasses and a raincoat.

“Yes, but Isabelle, there’s no room left in my bags.”

“Roll up the raincoat and squash up the hat, that’s all. It can be handy at times to pass off as a guy.”

I’d been in Germany for three days and already saw the use of Isabelle's grandfather's old rags. Transforming myself into a man was the key that allowed me to venture into Hamburg’s sticky alley: Reeperbahn. If Amsterdam dedicated an entire neighbourhood to theirs, Hambourg focussed all its vices into a single artery. The previous night, wanting to go, I had been intimidated by a prostitute perched on tricky high heels, while another poured a tumbler filled with urine over me. Cleaning my coat that night at the youth hostel, I made plans for tonight. I had created a persona for myself. I would play a scrawny man ashamed of going to whores, cramped in faded clothes, fleeing women’s glares behind ridiculously big glasses. They must be accustomed to seeing those types.

Tonight I would enter. I’ll slip on the disguise and stop asking myself if a man followed me, a bit like when I pass through the Gay Village, in Montréal. The feeling of being of no interest to anyone, being incognito, persona more or less grata, but not prone to being followed. I have small non-sensical ideas, illogical, but that reassure me in spite of everything. And since last November, I cultivate anything that neutralizes implosions, even ventilators in winter. "Sex," therefore, that foreground word on all the signs of the city, would become nothing more than a term translated into thousands of languages. It would be from now on an odor, a colour, I would know its obscene background. I let the foam of the cappuccino slip down my throat tapping the bottom of the cup, and with my eyes I searched for a place to change.

As a man, I headed towards the Reeperbahn. It was ten at night, 4 pm in Montréal. Knowing that it was still light out in Québec reassured me, in a certain way, as if the hot neighbourhood was simply a make-believe place, a theater set. Clues indicated that I was nearly there. On post cards, naked women dressed in garishly coloured lace had replaced the steeples, the fish and the cargoes. Open thighs painted on the doors of a bar advertised

that its crotch could be found inside. Despite being disguised as a man, I'd never felt like such a girl. A world was opening before me.

A compelling smell of humidity crawled up my collar and made me nauseous: The Queen of Pornography had sweaty armpits. My feet were glued to the asphalt. More and more women whose upper-bodies were strangled by shiny corsets roamed, yet never deserting, a well-guarded territory. A crown of double dildos ringed with fused lights decorated the window of a sex shop, in the style of a Christmas garland. Here, sex had overtaken the threshold of temptation rather than leading to ostentation.

Flashdance, Dirty Dancing and the other old hits of the eighties set the beat to the whores swaying hips. I quickly entered the alley. If I were one of them, I would have told myself: "Well, there's a little pervert excited like all the others, nervous and intimidated, that wants to fuck one of us," and I would have found myself ridiculous. I pushed up the glasses on my nose and lifted my gaze. A great Spanish looking lady draped in a red dress wiggled her hips behind a window. I gave her about forty, maybe even older because of the thin silver threads that ran through her hair. She performed flamenco poses, with her neckline open to her thighs and arched her back. She sought to hold my gaze; I fled hers. She gibbered something that sounded like 'lesbian' and I went elsewhere.

The atmosphere of candid camaraderie that ruled here stunned me. The men spoke amongst themselves and laughed loudly. We saw marines engaging in great conversations with whores taller than themselves. Besides a few, the prostitutes were mostly pretty. They resembled super-women, with never-ending lashes, breasts as round as ballons, raised to their collarbones, the arch of their backs, the curve of their calves, the fake beauty marks on their cheeks and their dark hair. Nobody seemed to feel guilty of anything whatsoever, the men lingered in the alley, declaring that Felicia was something else, but that Andy, for blow jobs, was unparalleled. They spoke mainly English and German with funny shattered accents.

Back at the youth hostel, under a state of shock.

Chapter II

I get in, particularly inspired, from a poetry class. It's 7:30, the door isn't locked and my cat slips out the moment I push it half-open. I hurry to play Portishead's new album, bought that very afternoon near the university. I remove my earrings, splash cold water on my face, listen to my voicemail and place frozen pizzas in the oven. Back in my room, I stretch out on my bed, curl up in the quilt stuffed with goose feathers and find two quarters under the pillow. The door of my closet is ajar - I get up and close it. The telephone rings, it's my brother, we talk for a few minutes, "Alex, I have to let you go because synthetic pizzas are on the verge of burning to ashes." Before reaching the kitchen, I turn on the television to watch the six o'clock news. Cast and credits on all channels; I turn it off, unaware that I myself would be the main headline of the next news bulletin. Opening of the fourth song of the album.

Back in the hallway, a gloved hand is laid on the bedroom's doorframe. It dawns on me as soon as an armed man appears, his head covered in a hood and his eyes concealed behind sunglasses. And I begin laughing, thinking it's a joke from one of my roommate's friends.

When reading a book or watching a movie, we expect the worst, the emergence of the evil one; it happens differently in reality. We have a tendency of taking our everyday life for granted, foolishly having faith in the world, diluting suspicions in the daily flow of life. However, reality sometimes pulls life further than fiction would dare, for fear of straying into improbabilities. That's at least what I understood that fourth of November, 1997. I ask him what he is doing here, suddenly catching sight of a weapon in his hand. It's already too late. He leaps on me, irascible.

A blow against the corner of my eye, the knife's handle smashed above my cheek nearly in my iris. I did not know what violence was, it still pains me to say it even now. Before relating the scene to the police officers, I had to search the dictionary for the names of the

blows delivered. At least, there are some lovely words: whipped clouts (you'd think the name of sliced African crab soup at a big banquet), punched face topped with bruises (imagine lemon-lime sorbet with a finishing touch of vodka), entire face contused, a variety of lesions and blood pissing out of my nose (see tender rare veal medallion); and, for dessert, words ending with 'ing': shaking, colliding, slicing; that's it, I'm getting there (islands floating in raspberry current). There, I've been cooked and now, will my flesh be devoured?

I still do not understand exactly what this is all about. Of course, in an alley, I would have interpreted the scene differently, but in my apartment...I'm too busy asking myself how he could have possibly entered to focus on his gloved hand that locks the door. It's my roommate's fault, he left it unlocked. And I will be the one to pay for it.

He throws himself on me again, from behind this time, his knees in mine. I fall under the threat of a knife pressed against my throat. I allow myself to be picked like a spoiled apple. At that precise moment, I imagine myself stretched out in a bloodbath, a slit jugular, the attacker on the run. A feeling of unreality assails me, I am a character of Bret Easton Ellis's dark novels where the action unfolds in a lost neighbourhood of New York. I exist within the framework of a fatality that is truly not my own, I no longer have a hold over my own life.

Perhaps a thief, surprised by my arrival, hopes to run off with my computer and my electronic appliances; collaborating is the thing to do, the presence of a weapon and all the rage that is fully thrown in my face leads me forcefully to this idea. He ties my hands behind my back and covers my mouth and eyes. He is so tangled up in his gloves that I can barely contain my laughter. He struggles to put the tape in his mouth to snip it with his teeth. He grows irritated, tries to slice it with his sharpened weapon, all while hesitating at releasing my hands (with reason, as I would leap to flee). Behind him, a jar of pencils with a pair of scissors are well in sight. I smile inwardly, imaging myself handing them to him. It's long, he is clumsy and my calm is in contrast to his awkward and styleless agitation.

Chapter III

I strolled through Hanover's baroque gardens with two Australian girls I'd met at the youth hostel. The area was crowded with strange individuals that would have been at home with the harmless monsters of my childhood nightmares. Giant flies danced to the sound of Tibetan instruments whose guttural music gave a realistic touch to gardens in which Wagner or Beethoven would have felt at home. Three fat English women bordering on sixty wandered while clucking endlessly, in their singsong voices, 'absolutely gorgeous'.

A red ghost on stilts approached a child, imprisoning him between his sticks. The youngster screamed, but in vain, the monster waited until he quieted down. Scarlet and scattered, as if the ghost had bled over him, the youngster succeeded in extracting himself from his grip. Nothing like the kindness of Mickey and Minnie Mouse, smiles glued to their faces. I observed the child in tears, his parents laughing, when a shiver of terror ran up my spine: a man disguised as a malicious fisherman had just smacked me with a gutted fish, in the neck, for a laugh. But I don't laugh when it comes to necks, no.

At the end of an alley of limetrees was a labyrinth of high cedars. We ventured in, half smiling, believing it to be child's play...and we stayed for two hours.

I began by losing the Australians, realizing that this supposed child's game was dizzying. Returning to the centre for the eleventh time, I was gripped by vertigo: I was unable to locate the area by which I had entered. Everything was symmetrical, there was no reference point, not even a weather vane or even a garbage can.

Your sense of orientation is a bit like your faith in the world: you have to lose it to grasp its worth. And if by chance you do regain it, your state of deficiency is made up of equilibrium and not of delight.

Chapter IV

He throws me on my bed and crushes my face in the pillow. I can't breathe and can't see. Sitting on my back, he asks me if I live with anyone. He wants to know if I have a car and a credit card. I have none of that, poor fool. You should have gone to an Executive in Brossard, out for the evening if you wanted to fill your pockets. It reminds me of those unpleasant sessions at the dentist who threatens the inside of your mouth while asking you questions that you can't answer, gob wide open. Except in this instance, rather, I'm required to keep quiet.

The attacker gets up, repeats that if I do everything he says, it will go very well, "and don't forget that I have a knife." He has a Spanish accent and is overexcited. Roaming as gracefully as a Serpent in a narrow aquarium, he asks me where my wallet is. I curse inwardly of only having change, about two dollars. I don't understand. Why is there vermin in my home?

He overturns my school bag and rages at having found nothing valuable. I think of saving myself by calculating the distance to cover in reaching the door. A few extra seconds must be anticipated because of my blindfolded eyes that prevent me from seeing where to place my feet, then, once I reach the doorknob, another few seconds, the time to turn around and open the door, with my wrists tied behind my back. Mathematically, even in estimating the reaction time of the attacker, the emergency exit operation is impossible, because I would need to slip by him. It's a lost cause, but I still play it for all or nothing. And it's at that moment that things intensify, truly.

The CD absurdly sets the rhythm to the scene. I already feel like retching when I think of hearing it again. The attacker seizes me by the collar, hysterical, and I pitch strategic screams towards my neighbours as loud as I can with my tongue imprisoned. They're there, I know it, I hear the one upstairs walking and I think I detect the sound of a TV quiz coming from downstairs. And my shouts adopt a strange intonation. Normally, screams are spontaneous, slack without consciousness intervening. My voice gushes out

like an S.O.S Morse Code, a logical sound coming from the depths of my throat. Scream the loudest possible in the hopes of being heard, tear out my flesh in a delirium of senses, damage one or two vocal chords if necessary. The long abortive cry of a mermaid, tail shredded by a ship's propeller. This creaking and long sound ends with a question mark. A procession of questions jostles my head, vibrating a single vocalised strand. Why me? How did he manage to get in here? Do I act like a victim or try to defend myself? He is armed. Where is my roommate? Can my cat tell that something is up? The attacker, did he wipe his feet before coming in? Did he inhale the perfume of my clothes? Why doesn't he take off with my computer and my TV? Can he not stop Portishead's CD that sets a gentle tone to this violence?

He smells a bit sweaty. He wears no cologne. I'm oblivious as to how everything would unfold without my usual calmness. At once, I understand the why of many things and I envision with disgust the possibility of a forced sex-to-sex.

Remaining passive doesn't interest me. A powerful blow right on the nape of my neck and a loss of equilibrium for a few seconds: that is what I reap searching to escape. "If you stay quiet, everything will be fine," he murmurs in my ear while tearing off a strip of skin on my right arm with a knife far too sharp.

Save myself. Try again. Logically, that's the only valid exit; I couldn't give a damn about anything else. I'm terribly busy asking myself how to be spared. Fear comes after, once you've had the time to evaluate what has been avoided. The fear that it could be repeated, the awareness of having had a narrow escape because of a detail. The fear of this evidence that you do not want to surrender to: you are lucky to be alive, the fear of no longer ever having faith in the world, the fear of when a childhood friend met somewhere comes from behind and covers your eyes asking you to guess who it is. The fear of no longer being able to wear necklaces, the panic when those who love you embrace you too long. The fear of closets. The fear of walking home alone. The fear of alleys and rows of cars. Your heartbeat accelerating at least once a day because a wall creaked.

Save myself, yes. I run, like in nightmares, moving forward in emptiness. My attacker panicks, delivers two direct hits to my stomach (my hands are tied behind my back; I can only take it, breathlessly) and brings me back to my bed like a knight in shining armor. The pain makes me black out now and again. A warm blade against my throat. He is furious, I ask him what he wants through the bandage applied over my mouth, as if I didn't have a clue. I move restlessly and can only think of fleeing. I want to disappear or not exist. The initial collaboration, was to give him the time to leave with my computer and my TV, not for me to take a beating or be subjected to rape. But it's too late. How weak you are when deprived of your senses!

And if he was also scared? He is sitting on my ribs and I try to give him a few hits with my knees, unsuccessfully. I won't surrender. I want to hurt him, but now he's desperately aggressive. He settles himself above my pillow and, with the goal of shutting me up, applies his two leathery thumbs around my neck; squeaking ridiculously, he tries to strangle me.

To be under water ten seconds too long. To be submerged at the bottom of a pool by a stranger. The lifeguard naps. My screams drowned out in the water, swallowed by chlorine. People circulate thinking that we're playing, that this parasite is attached to me in a friendly embrace. The lifeguard reprimands a turbulent child, while I, I'm drowning.

To be sitting in an electric chair, feeling my eyes ejected from their orbits before dying. Understand why the tape covers my eyelids: to avoid two excavations in the middle of a ravaged face. No longer being able to breathe, for ten seconds, ten seconds too long, because my mouth is gagged, my jaw welded shut, my nose blocked by a cold that is circulating.

To be an astronaut and drop your oxygen tank in space. Return to the spaceship, but have nothing left to inhale. Try to catch fistfuls of air unsuccessfully. To be helpless and powerless. Hope that I'm starring in a bad movie, believe that maybe it's a nightmare, not to resign myself. Wish that the pool will be emptied in record time, believe that a power

outage could save me from the chair just in time, look through spaceship's window and notice the oxygen tank.

At best, it would be a dream within a dream.

Chapter V

I was stuck in a spiral that I could not escape. As soon as I stirred, I sunk down even further, needlessly expending my energy by getting worked up in this way. Each time that I believed I was closer to an exit, I found myself in the middle of the labyrinth and my calculations proved to be inaccurate. I wanted to charge through the alley of cedars and, forsaking scratches, at least get out of this dizzyness. The arrival of Maggie, who had chosen instead to laugh, calmed me. She spoke of foxes being tracked down in the hunt with hounds, in that rubber accent of the people from Down Under. We took a road, randomly, chatting, without trying to logically evaluate our chances of getting out...and reached outside within three minutes. Hannah wasn't there. I stayed near the exit we'd taken and Maggie cried out. We heard several "fuck", "stupid game," hypocritically strangled by the thick silence of the trees, and Hannah finally reappeared. Today we escape, we escape.

Chapter VI

One solution in mind. The right one. The only one. Act as if I am losing consciousness. Make myself limp in the Serpent's grasp. Let him believe that I might be dead. He stops strangling me, just in time. My game saved me, I owe my life to my necessary theatrics. The sixth song of Portishead's CD draws to a close. In the silence that divides the following song, I hear the neighbour downstairs zapping, a laundry detergent commercial, the aggressive beep that announces the end of a quiz sprint, people clapping, the canned laughter of an American sitcom. Upstairs, the floor creaks as my neighbour goes to his bedroom, just above my own.

The knife plunged into my right arm as if being nearly strangled to death wasn't sufficient in numbing me. I don't know if the weapon is clean, I feel it tearing my flesh, plunged into the even tissue of my skin. The attacker waits before withdrawing the blade. I feel the metal on one of my muscles. Reduced to passivity, devoid of all possibilities of action except miming death, I can only feel the torn zones of my skin. Moist tears of blood form on my arm, descending to my upper arm. I feel them accumulating in my joined hands. My hands are full of blood and I do not want to stain my quilt. I do not know what to do with this storm of blood accumulating in the funnel of my wrists.

He wants to kill me!

Footsteps in the stairs that lead to my apartment. The attacker gets up and I hear my bedroom door slam. In my lucid but enforced blindness, I imagine two possible scenarios. It could be my roommate. The Serpent is then hidden behind my door, stretched out against the wall, and he waits. I try to scream, but my lips are sewed together; and the second possibility removes all ability to speak, makes my heart beat fast enough to slice through the air. And what if there was more than one? If I got the beating of my life, if they raped me ten times instead of once? The door of my bedroom had then been closed by the attacker who went to open to his accomplices.

I'm afraid of dying.

For the time being, I have to survive, swim over the wave of what remains of my life. If in exactly five minutes nothing has happened, it's because the Serpent has slithered off. If not, he is behind the door and planning to direct a horror movie. I am in a state of incredible lucidity; fear and hysteria make way for steeled logic. Or maybe because fear, pushed to its extreme limit, becomes perceptiveness. I count the seconds and tales of hippopotamuses spring to mind. One hippopotamus, two hippopotamuses until sixty, five times. It's long. The precision of a Swiss clock; I must have a margin of error between three and six seconds at the most. I prefer letters to numbers, sentences to matrixes, poetry to algebra, but you don't always have the choice. It's grandma who taught me to count hippopotamuses. At the beginning, I always confused them with rhinoceroses and this mistake made her laugh. Except for the horn and the rugged skin, these are two big grey beasts that are only seen in zoos. And even then, not everywhere. I think I've already seen a happy hippopotamus in a pond of mud at *Parc Safari*.

Is that what one thinks of before crossing over to the other side?

Sixty hippopotamuses: I leap up and escape. I get to my bedroom door, turn around, reach for the doorknob without receiving any blows. I run towards the front door. It is wide open and I strike my forehead violently against it. I can barely utter a groan of pain with the DIY across my face. Dizzy, I climb the stairs at full speed to my neighbour. I don't know if anyone is in the stairs. And I experience a strange joy at the idea of not being dead, of still dragging life by my sides.

Toc! Toc! Toc! "Who is it?" James singsongs in a jovial voice. I knock with both my fists simultaneously, weakly, and let myself slide to the doormat. Fuck, I'd surely soiled the door with blood. I hear James saying goodbye to someone on the phone. "Ok, I'll be there. You can count on me. See you." I'll bet the family ranch: he will witness the most horrific sight of his life and sleep fitfully tonight.

I want to make a sign for him to first remove the tape over my mouth, so that I can finally breathe in great gulps of air. But he begins by cutting the tape around my eyes, panics at seeing that they are red and bulging, already encircled in blue shadows. He trembles a great deal and repeats “Oh, my God” continually. Next, he unties my hands full of blood and gets sterilized bandages to take care of the wound. The cut is not very long, but rather deep. The bleeding is abundant, I want to howl in pain, but my lips are still glued together. James’s paleness and his worry expose a turquoise vein in the middle of his forehead; and I, my face twisted in relief and terror, I rest stretched out on the ground, in the entrance of his apartment, cracking my knuckles.

My head is swollen, a trisomic’s skull. The assault in the mirror equals that of the knife. My face displays the entire range of crimson, scarlet to indigo. I look like a lilac in bloom. The buds aligned on the perimeter of my lips outline a coloured rosary. I did not know that a human being could bleed from the white of the eye. Trying to observe one’s eye is exasperating, it’s an arduous endeavour, if not impossible.

In cutting the tape from my eyes, James shortened a few eyelashes. I think of my Aunt Louise, opening her oven’s door and bolting upright, black in soot, missing facial hairs. I think of children’s drawings. Suns with eyelashes become Lady Sun. “Sun” in German is feminine. I throw a quick glance at the adhesive tape lying on the ground, blood stained and covered in wisps of hair.

I am a monster of bruises, a Picasso nightmare. With three Beauty and the Beast band-aids on my right arm. At the sight of this image of myself, I dare utter a terror-stricken cry.

I, my bloody eyes before my brother in tears. We head towards Venise-en-Québec, there where my mother lives, there where I took my first breath and where I was conceived. My mother and my brother came to get me. I think they would have made the trip by helicopter if they could have. I was laid out on the upstairs neighbour’s kitchen floor with a blanket over my head when they finally arrived. It was out of the question that I set foot

back in my apartment. I wanted my brother to pack my suitcase, come back up with the cat and that we never set foot in there again. I caress the short locks of hair fallen over the nape of my neck. I will tell my Literature friends that from now on I resemble, with my scarlet eyes, to the characters with ‘ruptured pupils’ in Anne Hébert’s poems. Proud and dignified in spite of it all, barely recovered from that fantastic state of extreme lucidity. I already experience great pleasure in describing my attack in the least amount of details, the emphasis on my performance of losing consciousness. I am a heroine. The Hochelega-Maisonneuve version of Lara Croft.

It must well be 11 pm when we reach Venise-en-Québec. I don’t exactly recall what I said to them during the trip. I had that damn Portishead song etched deeply in my ear. We drove in front of a *Coq Rapide* restaurant in flames and I smiled, thinking that I would not be the only one ruined the following morning. When I grasped that we were heading towards the hospital, I naively asked why. The psychiatrist spoke of attempted murder by strangulation. After the check up, they confirmed that I did not suffer from hysteria, that I was almost perfectly healthy. If I had grasped that it was truly me being discussed, I would have taken it as an insult. My calm and I in the midst of a storm raging down on my body. I, gagged, dragging myself in record time to my neighbour’s despite my tied hands and blindfold, laughing when a potential murderer had suddenly exited my closet as I headed towards the kitchen. I having thought of turning off the oven when I sent my brother to the ‘crime scene’. Of course I’m not hysterical, it seems to me that would be as clear as day. Driving by the *Coq Rapide* once again, I laughed. My brother asked me how I managed to smile after all that had just happened to me. I told him that in addition of having nearly died, my apartment could have blazed like a kebab if I hadn’t remembered those pizza-pockets burning to ashes in the oven.

Chapter VII

I headed towards the South aboard an ICE, a sort of German Bullet Train. Savouring an almond and cream cake, a German newspaper on my lap and Tori Amos ringing in my ears, I left Lower Saxony for Bavaria. We crossed through the town of Lou-Andreas Salome, Göttingen. Germany was green, green and green, sometimes bled grey by the Rhine, sometimes dotted by small red houses, looked down upon by old castles.

A French couple faced me, no doubt believing that I understood absolutely nothing of what they were saying. The girl was very beautiful: dark complexion, moon shaped face, pouty lips and thick hair cascading down the middle of her back. Long raindrops streaked my window and I made out graffiti in the background. The French girl's name was Catherine. A blue fog congested the mountains, they were escorted by vines, greens and mustard fields. During most of the trip, I struggled against sleep as if my life depended on it.

Because since last November, falling asleep in public was the worst thing that could happen to me.

Chapter VIII

In the days following the attack, nobody knew how to react. My friends in Venise-en-Québec visit me. Emmanuelle offers me a box of jujubes and acts as if I'm recovering from pneumonia. I'm still in bed; she sits near me, pulls the blanket under my chin. The moment she brushes against my neck, I feel a discomfort never experienced before, the sensation of an exhaust pipe crushed under the tires of a car.

- Do you need syrup? she asks me.
- I don't have a cold, Manue.

She apparently preferred an illness, even serious, to my story.

It's as if nobody understands that I am indebted to life by a question of timing, good reflexes, and the arrival of my roommate, who for that matter returned to his native Lower St.Lawrence following the attack. Miming loss of consciousness, finally catching my breath after the bursting of the white of my eyes equals that I am still alive. The arrival of the roommate equals no rape. I am 'not killable', let it be known.

Maxime, another childhood friend, drops by to smoke a joint in my company before going to work. I notice his embarrassment, but we both burst into laughter when he blurts out: "I hope my eyes aren't as red as yours." Then my mother buys me the victim's kit: leopard scarf to conceal hammered on throats, starlet sunglasses, lots of Laura Secord marshmallow-caramel chocolates, vanilla cigarillos, bottle of porto, and a black box similar to a pager that, when you pull on a cord, transmits a shrill wailing - let's call it the power-that-screams-for-gagged-girls - modern member of that family of contraptions for victims: the rape victim's whistle, the personal alarm of gagged girls, the pepper spray of fearful girls (rapid steps, gripping a small thingy that gives the impression of potential defence). Would the rape of a deaf girl be the perfect crime?

The next object that will become an annexe to my being is a gun. Because discussing with maniacs is pointless. Because the legitimate defence is utopian. I'll point the barrel of the gun against the rapist's temple and tell him: "You will pay for what you had planned on doing. First, empty your bank account. We'll pass by a florist for you to buy me dyed sunflowers, those with a purple stem and bruise coloured petals, to go with my wounded face. Lastly, I'll plunge twenty needles in each testicle."

They avoid leaving me alone. My mother and my brother have taken some time off work. I want to read an *Astérix*: they do the same while casting glances over their books. I blurt out, just like that, that I crave lobster. My brother immediately runs to buy three at the market. It's as if it's been my birthday for three days, but that everyone is sad. We avoid alluding to the attack, as if I have no desire to talk about it and that I could burst into tears. I fall asleep in my mother's arms with my thumb in my mouth.

- Venise-en-Québec Osteopathy Centre hello!

- Hello. Is it possible to make an appointment with Olivier Ernaux for... for a bit of an emergency.

- We have a cancellation. If you can be here for 11 o'clock...

- I'll be there.

I walk through the empty streets of the grey town centre, my eyes all red. I pass my sixth grade teacher. If he recognized me, he must think that I'm involved in something extremely nefarious or that my boyfriend beats me. But I avoid looking at people. I am a child born prematurely, thrown hastily at life and into the open air. I have electric knots of fear in my neck.

In the waiting room, they observe me hypocritically. A child asks his mother the reason behind the colour of my eyes. The osteopath greets me, intrigued, and I spit out the story all at once. My red eyes linger in his; I know he has a daughter my age and that my tale will be effective. On several occasions, he shuns the insistency of my stare: my tale scarcely amuses him. Once again, the listener pays great attention to the first part of my

story – curiosity kills – without letting me finish it at my own pace, hurries to get out of it, sensing the absence of a happy ending. I continue with my physical ailments, which should snap him out of his languor. “Firstly, I feel that my windpipe is crushed, my arm hurts, but I assume that you can’t touch it, seeing that it’s cut. My false ribs on the right side are dislocated, flattened by a knee. My entire face hurts, my neck and then my whole back.”

He slips on rubber gloves. “Stick your tongue out,” he tells me. My tongue is caught between his two fingers, pulled out of my mouth. I laugh and ask him if he’s taking the piss. It’s for my knocked in trachea. I have a horrific vision of that other gloved man – my attacker – not because of germs, but of his desire to remain anonymous. I feel suddenly fatigued, disgusted at having my face played with, which is purple and all swollen.

A coffee in an ugly and empty restaurant. I then hurry to get home, because my mother and Alexandre will return soon and I don’t want my absence to worry them.

After a week spent in the bosom of my family, with childhood friends, I return to Montréal to finish the semester. Just to convince myself of my own strength, I announce to everyone: “It’s not a maniac that will ruin the last year of my degree.” I want them to admire my courage. Definitely not that they say to me, hypocritically handing me a cup of coffee and cream: “Poor thing, if he raped you, feel free to talk to me about it.” Definitely not receiving phone calls from old friends that I haven’t seen in two years and who, without even taking the time to be subtle or delicate, ask:

- Hi, it’s Anne-Marie, how’s it going?

- Fine, you? Long time no see...

- Eh, is it true you were attacked by a madman who wanted to strangle you?

- Yes, who told you?

- In the apartment where you had the big Halloween party?

- Yeah.

- Seems that it’s your roommate who saved you?

- Yes and no. But it's a long story and now, I don't have the time. Bye, I'm in a hurry.

The vultures are drawn to my drama. Every time I narrate it, I refine the tale, like a storyteller, and I feel as if I'm offering it to someone as a present. I want to give my story to those I choose. Hearing it narrated by another - my mother, for example - horrifies me. The tone is never right. Everyone pities me; I think that they should admire me instead. I'm the heroine. I was only victim by default.

My brother decided he would move into my place for an unspecified period of time. To protect me, but also to reassure himself. Alexandre is terrorized by the idea that something could happen to me again, by the fear of my death. My friends Emmanuelle and Maxime, my mother, my brother and I, drive towards Montreal, ominously. My mother bought me new oak furniture. She told me that we would change my room, Alex would take care of me and if I didn't want to return to university right away, it wasn't a problem.

The apartment is black in soot, soiled by dead leaves and mud – the detectives didn't remove their shoes - and the place reeks of old ashes. My roommate has not set foot here since the incident. Huge strawberries, probably transgenic, rot in the fridge and in the garbage lies three empty packs of Export A.

Chapter IX

I'd just arrived at the youth hostel in Munich, right near Rotkreutz place, and I had terrible lower back pains. The twelve-hour trip and changing trains with my huge backpack had exhausted me. In the hostel's kitchen, I nearly burst into tears in front of my burnt pasta. There then was this burst of candid laughter, like I'd never heard before and I couldn't tell if it came from a man or a woman. I turned towards the source of the androgynous voice: a tall, thin guy offered me noodles. Rarely have I seen a guy with such lovely features. A Czech, I later learned. That evening, we went to a Biergarten to drink a lemon-flavoured beer. We were surprised by a storm and, huddled under an umbrella, the man with the features as fine as a bird and I kissed. I had the urge to make love in all the cathedrals of Prague.

He didn't want to accompany me to Dachau. "I visited the Terezin camp in the Czech Republic and that's enough for me." I bit in his hair, which he had red and disorganized below his ears, and covered, with my lips, his impossible smile and his grey cat's eyes. He would hang out in the English Gardens reading *L'insoutenable légèreté de l'être* in Czech. His name rang like a very deep inhalation. Ihmre, was his name.

I left the hostel early to pass by the post office before catching the metro. It was drizzling and a thick dampness clung to my bones. Descending towards Rotkreutzplatz, I stepped over a twisted hanger, near the sidewalk, and what a fall! Stretched out full length, my head nearly plunged in a puddle of muddy water and my right palm split open, I laughed while cursing. I didn't even know how to say "bleeding" in German. "*Entschuldigung, meine Hande sind verletzt.*" "Sir, my hands are injured," I said to a gas station attendant. He took out a first aid kit, removed one by one the pebbles from the wound and applied a bandage over my cut that bled abundantly. I had the taste of ether in my mouth.

I continued on my way devouring an apple, disgusted by the long slugs that crawled across the wet cobbles. The terrestrial mollusks wallowed in the humidity, sometimes

bursting into a greenish mush, proffering their pallid stomachs to the hurried steps of the passers-by.

Chapter X

I no longer have coffee with my downstairs neighbour. Guilt and the feeling of being an anti-hero torment him, it seems. He heard me scream. It must be said that I didn't scream much: only one time in fact, the moment I tried to escape in vain. A strategic scream, a bottle thrown into the sea, a desperate cry addressed to Someone, if Someone was in the vicinity.

I now find myself in the stairs and his girlfriend is facing me. She asks me how I am, Perhaps trying to discern the scarlet of my eyes beyond my sunglasses (I'm becoming paranoid, by sheer logic, and learn to be suspicious of people). I don't really know what to answer. If I'm doing well, it's because of one reason: the discovery of my strength. However, fear mixed with silence gnaws at me. My loneliness is unbearable. I've become a monster of anxiety, features drawn, face ravaged by worry. To the question "how are you?" I make do with a heartfelt "not bad", and for the first time, it's true; my situation hasn't gotten worse. I ask her why her beloved avoids me. It's because he feels guilty, the incident shook him up, he blames himself, isn't very proud to be a man, she explains to me, sympathetically. Maybe she's waiting for me to say: "no, no, it doesn't matter, tell him that I don't hold him responsible and that I'm getting over it." I am incapable. Things would have happened differently if he'd intervened. Imagining him zapping in his armchair, in the hour when nothing good is on TV, while I was plunged in near death three meters above his head enrages me. In this entire story, I am the heroine and the victim.

They believe that I'm going from worse to less worse because the crimson of my bruises is turning pink. But who screens the morbid and repetitive performances that take place in my head at lightening speed? Several times a day, the movie of my attack plays on all the channels of my inner TV. And when the movie starts, I must look at it scene by scene waiting for the end, then peace. The only trick that I know to fight it is to open my eyes and say 'stop' aloud. And turn on the light, even to sleep. Especially when sleeping.

Who can guess the grip fear has over my loneliness?

Chapter XI

Aboard the Strassenbahn – a little city train that leads to the Dachau camp site - I exhorted myself to be compassionate, as if I feared I would be numb before the most consummate work of human destruction. I imagined the prisoners, packed in cattle trucks and ordered myself to be moved by the surroundings in their memory. I wanted to react with as much compassion as my roommate. The attack disturbed him so much that he told me he would never set foot in the apartment again, “and maybe never in the big city as well.” Strange logic. Proportionally speaking, there are as many horrors in reclusive villages – fertile grounds for hidden vices – as in big cities, but he shares my fear, it’s less for me to carry, one could say, and more to the point, I consider that displaying empathy.

It looked like a farm for human beings. Some parents had brought their two year-old tot who screamed loudly enough to extract his lymph nodes. His hoarse voice of furious baby hung over the general whispering. I was stunned to see families. If I had a child, I would offer them Neuschwanstein Castle, not Dachau. An American girl carefully filmed the inside of the toilets in a shed insistently. In memory of the people that suffered, her delicate spouse uttered cries and hummings meant as a historical reconstruction of the events, an American remake without the special effects, bad taste multiplied by ten. Pathological.

Facing the road leading to the monument erected in memory of the atrocity, a copper sculpture caught my attention. We could see, entangled in a smooth mass, prisoners as thin as wires and thorny fences. I admired such aestheticism born of horror. A phrase by Santayana presided over the spirit of the area. “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Poppies littered the ground where the imprisoned had bled to death. The wound to my palm still very fresh was joltingly painful, a dull pain compared to the one awakened by aluminium wrestling with a tooth filling.

A small community of Carmelites had settled in the camp. The monastery’s architecture had for a cross for base that continued and ended the main alley leading to the

administration buildings. The Sister's units formed the arms of the cross and the cloister consisted of the head. The chapel was the body of the cross, the altar and the tabernacle were erected in the heart. I imagined the architect's expression, Josef Wiedermann when they asked him to design the plans for the Carmel at Dachau. Surely the same scowl of those post-war tattoo artists, who were asked to transform nazi crosses into orchids.

On the left of the camp, the crematories and gas chambers were located. In memory of the burnt prisoners, people had placed candles on the actual ovens. The heat that emanated was frankly unpleasant. Not to mention that outside, it was very humid. Entering, the heat subsided, bringing a feeling of comfort...until we read "*Krematorium.*" Wire fencing in geometric motifs isolated this section of the camp. On the door, we could read the cynical inscription "*Arbei macht Frei*" – "Work brings freedom" – a slogan that reminds me of the famous "War is peace, freedom is slavery, ignorance is strength" of George Orwell's 1984. All these premises left me with the sensation of a badly coagulated scar, irony non-intentional. Curiously, the surface of my wound was turning green.

It surely must have been 2 pm. I was starving, but I was too nauseous to eat. I was discovering in Germany a contaminated land outlived by her fallen steeples, her concentration camps rotting her cities, her historical museums introduced in 1945 and her collapsed wall, shoddily healed. I was learning that she was not only the attacker that we wanted her to embody. She also had a wounded side, a few wide-open injuries named Dachau, Ravensbrück, Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald. Weakened by her power, she was recovering from her post-war injuries, stronger than ever for staring directly at the red of her eyes.

There was hardly anybody at the hostel. Just as well, I longed to take a scalding shower for three quarters of an hour. The spectre of what I had just seen would haunt me for a long time, already weighing down my breathing.

The Czech had slipped a message under my pillow. He would be in the English Gardens until 5 pm, near the Chinese Tower. The message was in English and in German. I was useless in Czech, he in French, I spoke English well and got by in German, he the opposite. But we succeeded in understanding each other well in this creole that we invented.

Chapter XII

I think of my brother's rage. Since the attack, Alexandre sleeps fitfully. For this reason, he installed three locks on the front and back doors of my apartment. Alex, following the attack, rising with the morning glories to apply my make-up, smearing me in foundation. "No, it's not the right colour; it's as if it makes you paler." Alex waiting for the drugstores to open to discuss all that with Mrs. Makeup. "This one should do the trick. It's Revlon; the other one, Maybelline, was too greasy. I also bought you eye shadow." It's touching to see a delicate brush in his big manly hand. More so than a knife. Obviously. His girlfriend lent me a sparkling saffron coloured scarf.

I am alone in the apartment when the detective tells me over the phone that two other girls were assaulted and raped by the same attacker as mine. Strange, the result of tears falling in grey dishwater. My brother arrives around 6 pm with mustard-coleslaw hotdogs from *Valentine's*. In hearing the news, he runs to vomit in the toilet, spits in the bowl and says he would have preferred that all that violence be directed towards him. He's also talking about his girlfriend. I think Isabelle has been raped before, but Alex only skims over the subject. His hair drenched in sweat and the rim of his mouth pink, he sits on the floor, his back leaning against the bathtub. I wipe an ice cold washcloth in his hair and over his face. We go to bed soon after. I give him a white pill to place under his tongue, to sleep, to stop the film that plays repeatedly and at lightening speed in my head and obviously in his. To see pink elephants on unicycles strolling along clotheslines in a Montréal alley. "Take this pill before bed, it's like a glass of white wine," the psychiatrist had said.

The following morning, the hotdogs still littered the table. Alex comes to wake me, a plate of caramel toasts in one hand and foundation in the other. The soundtrack is David Bowie.

Chapter XIII

Ihmre smoked a Philip Morris, his hair tangled on top of his head in the deep grooves of the tree that he is leaning against. I spied on him: he'd uprooted grass, scratched his stomach, rummaged through his army bag. For the first time, I noticed the delicateness of his nose, the diaphanous wings raising and lowering like the gills of a fish. He had outlined his eyes in kohl. I thought of my brother and smiled; I appreciated boys who mastered the rudiments of makeup. Without being effeminate, Ihmre had something feminine. He was the happy transition between man and woman, the being who opened the way to the other for me, who taught me to love strangers once again. He swallowed a sip of his apple drink and started on a marzipan chocolate bar while I approached without him seeing me.

- *Meine Liebste, wie geht's*, he said
- *Ganz gut! Well...* I found the trip a little traumatising.
- *Ja. Ich verstehe.* Like I told you. But you have to see it to understand.

His velvety eyes made me want to start a revolution with him, to scream in Czech at the top of a castle in Prague, to become a scribe for Jewish history, to swim the Vltava to and fro, swallowing it down in great gulps, until exhaustion, to stroll on Venceslas Place. They'd stolen *L'insoutenable légèreté de l'être* from him at the youth hostel and his desolate expression was charming. I tried to recite from memory the book's ending to him. He took my hand and, kissing my palms, worried about my wound. Stretched out on the grass, my head on his knees, I fell asleep.

Chapter XIV

I wake up, exhausted at having dreamt so much. Since my near-death experience, I revisit childhood fears: the dread of closets, the fear of loneliness and of the dark, the anxiety of nightmare victims. There are advantages and disadvantages to my condition. At least everyone understands my fear: my brother unscrewed the doors of my closet and moved in with me. Waking from a nightmare, I don't have to seek refuge in my mother's room, taking the risk of my ankles being grabbed by some undesirable hidden under my bed; my brother is there sleeping by my side. I'm pressed against his back, he exhales deeply and speaks dreamily to me. Speaking dreamily, it's saying to someone fresh from a nightmare: "No, I will mow the lawn tomorrow."

On television the other day, Claire Lamarche met with a group of survivors. They had survived illnesses, wars, assaults, suicides; to make a long story short, it was a lovely buffet of wounded souls. Some almost-deads come back to life with such pretensions! As if a brotherhood existed, a hidden sign disclosing members to peers. As if suddenly, the soul aged and the pupil darkened. Obviously, they'd seen their lives flash by followed by the luminous tunnel and it definitely wasn't question of hippopotamuses and rhinoceroses here, oh no! They glossed over the meaning of life and its opposite, nothing more. I hope that my demise steers clear of that tunnel cliché, otherwise I'd die exasperated. Of this imposed flirt with death, I retain only fear, when it exceeds its paroxysm, it becomes extreme lucidity. And that the eye can bleed.

Everything generated by the life that flees you is summed up in two words: sadness and paranoia. What I mean is of a sudden loss of faith in the world, a bottomless sadness like a rat that died of AIDS in a lab or at the bottom of a cauldron bubbling over flames. I mean a logical paranoia that deserves respect, which is based on reality and not on the tainted knot of a severe neurosis.

But, in parallel, a new strength is established, which can bring joy. What exactly is the nature of this self-confidence and of this strange joy that is spread innerly at the exact

moment where your faith in the world vanishes, to be replaced by the sadness of artificial lakes and fires in suburbia? Better to be sad and strong than ravaged and weak.

Beyond my turbulent nights, the day's shelter is subsequently withheld from me. If the monsters in my closet enter the cupboard when the first rays of dawn radiate from the sky, those of reality poison life 24 hours a day. Thus, the man sitting in the métro, a bouquet of flowers underarm, is he off perhaps to slit his wife's throat, without him nor her nor anyone suspecting it. Who knows, the skinny tall guy who fries Big Macs in McDonald's back kitchen might be a murderer. My attacker sold fruits at Jean-Talon market, displayed what the lawyer referred to as a 'low profile': 23 years old, a wife and an apartment in Montréal North. Police officers recently arrested him. Not because they were doing their job, worn out by perspicacity or whatever, no, no. The attacker had mislaid his wallet with all his ID cards at the third victim's home. Slumped in front of the TV in his living room, he didn't think for a second that it was police officers who knocked on his door. "*Que passa mi amor?*" might have asked his wife who was cooking in another room, in a singsong voice.

So I can no longer rely on the safety of the day or of my apartment. Alex went to work and I try to read. It's windy outside; at the slightest wall creaking I run out, refusing to set foot in my home again. I knock on James's door who comes with me to check the state of the premises and to reassure me. I am in the apartment since the previous evening and my brother was there with me this morning. I know very well that there is no one other than myself here but. I'm afraid. My cat's gentle steps across the floor accelerates my heartbeats. I hear him and rush towards the origin of the discreet noises, my personal alarm in hand, ready to let it roar. Frightened by this anxiousness, the tomcat retreats, tail between his legs.

I'm afraid. An illogical fear which defies all explanation. When I'm alone, it returns to haunt me like a sly ghost, an unrelenting cold sore. As soon as a friend comes over, it disappears, stays quiet, and I'm reassured. I make those who keep me company carry the entire weight of my fear. You must be very strong to keep me company nowadays. I have

red fireworks in the corners of my irises, on a stark white backdrop. The wounds to my face, the bruises to my throat, missing eyelashes and the cut on my arm tend to disappear. They still say that I'm getting better. As long as I'm not alone, I agree. Like two suicidal best friends who celebrate whenever they meet, forgetting to talk about death. Then, each heads home and the anguish races forth. When I'm alone, it's lucid fear, tireless, that stretches out with me on my quilt, looks me in the red of my eyes, found at the bottom of the microwave oven, sitting on my nutella jars, curled up in a ball in my dirty laundry. I hypocritically play games with myself not to hear the little creaks that stress me out. End of November, I turn on the ventilator and appreciate its comforting humming that subsides the sounds of the first floor's pipes, the people talking outside and the cat's gentle steps. But when I leave it on too long, it gives me a headache and I'm anguished at the idea of having to shut it off one day. To be confronted by so-called silence. So, I turn on the dryer and I even manage to laugh at myself.

I went to visit my friend Philippe, in the Village, right near Papineau métro station.

- Your eyes! Is it going to go away?
- It's already better than it was. I place a hot water washcloth over my eyelids, night and day, for twenty minutes. I'm sick of everybody looking at me. When I wear sunglasses, it's worst. I look as if I take myself seriously.
- I don't want to insult you but it's almost beautiful. It gives you a little something vampiric. We would expect to see your canines get longer when you smile.
- Did you know you could bleed from your eyes, you?
- No. I didn't know either and I still cannot comprehend that someone wanted you dead. Do you want me to massage your toes? It feels really great, you'll see.
- I lost faith in my senses, Philippe. A madman chose me to...in fact I don't really know why anymore. Rape me, strangle me, beat me up, steal my cash? I'm so tired of continually thinking about it. There's room for nothing else in my head, it seems. Me, I thought I was intuitive about these things...
- Come on, take off your socks.

I do not want any sound or movement to sneak past me. I challenge all my senses by subjecting them to a strenuous training session. I concentrate on hearing the blinking eyelashes of cats, the flapping wings of flies and hair falling to the ground. I dwell upon the invisible: the details of dust crystals vagabonding through the living room on sunny afternoons, the colour of water and the enclosing humidity. Nothing is softer to the touch than Isabelle's saffron scarf, crab meat and flour. I guide my senses in hearing all the silliness that hide within me. I smell the subtle odor of the sweat of shadows, those of cyclamen, and I draw up a list of voluptuous foods:

- Violet candies
- Thai soup (curry, coconut, lemongrass vermicelli and onions with a bit of lettuce at the bottom)
- Freshly squeezed pineapples
- Blueberry chocolate
- Munich-style figs (marinated overnight in brandy, wrapped in bacon and oven baked)
- Hungarian cheese croquettes
- Belgian white chocolat drink
- Almond milk
- Avocados
- Portuguese-style dates stuffed with Stilton
- Artichoke heart salad

I enter a café where over the door the seven colour rainbow flag is surmounted. Like cities, cafés can be sexual. The waiter sniffs 'Miss' at me in a high-pitched intonation. I quite like being the only female present in the place. I order a nutty banana cake, black chocolate, white chocolate on a bed of English cream. I've got a new ring on my finger.

Exiting the métro station, I was drawn to its colour: pure amber, a raw stone mounted on a large ring. The ring was too narrow for me, which never happens given the finesse of my fingers. The African vendor pulled out a long metal tube and slipped on the jewel hammering it as if to force it to distend under the hammer's clench. It made me slightly

queasy. I tried on the ring again. It slipped past the second joint, but resisted at three-quarters of my finger. The ring was stuck and I felt my ring finger swelling. Panicked, I smiled trying to pull it off me. Or pull me off it, I don't really know. It was no use, I was wrestling with this foreign body that had attached itself to my being against my will. I reddened in anger and tears sprung to my eyes. Frantically, I offered a hesitant hand to the vendor. Pulling very hard, he succeeded in removing the jewel, picked up his hammer again and worked on it for fifteen minutes. I wasn't even sure if I wanted to buy it at all. I sat on the dirty steps of the métro's stairs biting my nails like a madwoman. The vendor gave me a little tap on the fingers in seeing the result. My hand trembled, the ring fit perfectly. He began laughing, a lively laugh reaching a crescendo. Insulted, I said: "Ah, because you find this funny!" He took me by the hand and led me inside the little shop in front of a series of masks. "Which one do you want? You see that one, the one scowling, it looks exactly like you right now." I chose it: a black mask, long and tortured face, delicately lined.

Chapter XV

Just now, I felt just how much the attack had made me fragile. I went to buy fudge for Ihmre and I. Vanilla ice cream covered in white chocolate or apricot sugar: surely a factor that favoured immigrating to Germany. I was alone in the convenience store. The man at the cash was Greek, he told me he wasn't married and that he rarely saw girls like me. I eyed him scornfully, furrowing my brow for a brief moment. He took my hand to give me my change. His nails were black and his face, scattered with brownish stains. When I pushed the door to leave, he was there looking at me, and the door resisted. The bastard had locked me in. I felt my legs grow limp, my heart beat against my ribcage, my windpipe contract, my eyes became blood red. I immediately spotted a sharp object that would allow me to cause grievous harm. A wine bottle. I would shatter the bottleneck to the ground, smash his nose in while screaming in his ear: "Unlock the door or else I'm doing the same thing to your two eyes." I had fantasies of violence: I'd decided to make him pay, in the name of all the almost-strangled on earth. Everything unfolded inside my head in a single second. "Asshole, you are going to open up," I said. "*Ziehen musst Du,*" he replied, which meant "Pull instead of pushing." There, I admit, I was steaming mad, I cleared my throat and entire respiratory system and then I spat on the entrance's doormat. In the name of all those who lived on a razor's edge because they are dominated by a deviant.

I asked Ihmre why he came to Germany. Savouring his fudge, he spoke to me of the traumas of his Czech Republic, time and time again victim to foreign invasions. Passive and innocent territory, raped by Communists, Nazis, Americans, tourists, his republic recovers from her injuries as best as she can. From Germany, he wanted to contemplate strength, perfectionism, determination, the spirit of a powerful republic in good as in bad.

A drop of orange syrup dribbled on my knee. Remembering the concentration camps, I asked Ihmre where such animosity came from, how the human race could exterminate itself. Ihmre languorously licked the sweet liquid caramelising on my knee. He must believe that I was a bit naïve. I had nevertheless renounced at changing the world. Only, I

tried to understand what could bring someone to rape, to kill or to orchestrate a war. I was incapable of renouncing the whys gnawing away at me.

Ihmre told me things while jumping from one subject to another. The time where he'd visited a Czech concentration camp in Terezin. Near a vast anonymous cemetery shadowed by the Star of David, he'd noticed two or three neo-nazis smoking a joint, sitting on a tombstone. The blissful smiles they flaunted, he couldn't get it out of his head. His four little sisters, his studies in teaching the German language, which he wasn't certain he wanted to pursue. His desire to eat a healthy meal, drink a bottle of syrupy Czech wine and my big serious eyes that he already devoured.

I imagined Ihmre in a black coat, without makeup, crossing the bridge in Prague on a foggy morning to go to university, tossing a half-smoked cigarette in the Vltava, there where the gothic, baroque and thorny architecture is assembled in a worrisome harmony, like those encountered in books on Kafka.

Against the intense hate that I'd fully consumed during the afternoon, Ihmre and I saw only one solution: the opposite. We went to eat *schnitzel* at the Türkenhof, attended an outdoor classical concert, near the Town hall, drinking beer. Then we slept together at the youth hostel.

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