

FLAME OUT



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FLAME OUT



Michael Delisle

Translation by
Kathryn Gabinet-Kroo



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Elements of Poetry



I have not found an exergue for this book. An image that sets the tone, a phrase that draws the first line, a proper name to situate its gravity. A sentence to unlock the door.

I search to no avail. My disillusionment resembles a dereliction: I feel abandoned by literature, just as a drug addict feels abandoned by God. It seems that no one is willing to give me the pitch-perfect A so that I can move on to the suite of compositions that await me.

I am alone with the pages that follow.

Finding a book's incipit is cause for jubilation. Finding the one sentence that serves as both armature and abstract requires a hectic search. The exergue is there to provide a guarantee, to borrow Papa's hallmark—men quote other men—but it remains strictly decorative. It is a textually useless stepping-stone whereas the dedication expresses appreciation for deserving friends or hints at a secret mission that excludes the reader. You only truly take the plunge with the incipit.

Mine could read as follows: *I do not remember ever being light-hearted.*

It's true. I've always had, at least as far back as I can remember, death in my soul. This encumbrance, this obstacle to insouciance, is so much a part of me that I ended up seeing in it a kind of lucidity. This realization led me to the following belief: My consciousness is inseparable from my sadness. Added to this sadness is, of course, a feeling of foreboding. I put on a brave face with a kind of composure, but it seems to me that it has always been there. Even as a young man reading the positive reviews of my first collection of poems; even discovering, during a trip to Paris, the existence of Vouvray wine in a restaurant in the Marais; even as a six-year-old under a radiant sun, chasing after Diane C. so that I could unclothe her; even as a kid laughing myself silly while my father pretended to be a big bad wolf and slobbered as he nipped my ear, there had always

been in my heart of hearts these two poisons: the desire to seize to the moment and the eagerness for life to end.

Reading and writing poetry have helped me stay the course.

In a man's life, repetition is both the mystery and the key to unlock it. I don't know if it holds true for women, but for men, the same can be said of poetry, which is founded on the repetition necessary to the rhythm and on nothing else. We savour the poem with attention paid to the sounds that return. We understand the meaning of a life by lingering over the repetitions.

My first experience of repetition dates back to the winter of 1959. I'm referring here to a repetition that relates to rhythm.

Outside, the densely packed snow carpeted Rue Fontainebleau in the town of Jacques-Cartier. The night was calm and the dry cold muted all sounds. The neighbours heard the slamming of a taxi's door, the squeaking of stillettos in the snow, halting footsteps, the reedy sneeze of a young woman who had been out celebrating and was coming home late. Her stifled laughter before opening the door. It was not yet midnight; it was eleven fifteen. Sharp.

Inside, my father was waiting for her. At the sound of the taxi door, he flew into one of the dark rages that turned his heart to stone, flung the ladder under the trapdoor to the attic, and climbed up to look for a gun. He had stashed a number of them there, on the day he had decided to stop doing stickups. He climbed back down with a shotgun, which he loaded with two cartridges in front of my mother who stood, wobbling in her high heels, at the other end of the hallway. Without hesitating, she went to get me out

of bed and returned to face him, holding me out at arm's length. Papa aimed at her while she gripped my torso and matched the movement of the barrel so that I shielded her. I was a few months old. My bum diapered, my legs dangling in the void, and driven by a truly archaic impulse, I mimicked her screeching.

"Shoot!" she shrieked, "Oh, ye-e-e-e-ah, go ahead and shoot!" And I howled the vowels. Our song had the effect of a cold shower on the fury of my father, who always reacted strongly to music. My mother, with a feeling for heroic tales that she inherited from her Celtic ancestors, often told me how she'd simply gone out to have a drink with my Aunt Flo and how for a full year after that, I had started to cry every night at 11:15 on the dot.

Not at 11 o'clock.

Not at midnight.

Eleven fifteen, on the dot. As unvarying as the nightly news. And how at the end of one full year, I'd fallen silent

A dark hallway.

To the west, my father and his weapon.

To the east, my inebriated mother.

Me, suspended between the two, about to be torn apart by blazing bullets.

This is the earliest event in my history. I know nothing of what came before these refrains sung at a quarter past eleven every night for an entire year. That night was the night on which my story began.

Over the years, there have been various versions of this incident:

one where my mother is kneeling, naked, and begging

to be spared as she explains that she had been with her sister Flo the whole time;

one where my mother is wearing a cocktail dress and reeking of perfume, armpits and Gin Collins (in this version, she holds her head high and sends my father packing);

another where the door magically opens to let in a glacial draft that draws my father out of his murderous trance.

Over the years, I've managed to create my own zero draft:

My mother, whose great beauty during her adolescence allowed her to hope that her future would hold something better than my brother and me, called a babysitter so that she could go show everyone her movie-star good looks in a motel-bar on Taschereau Boulevard. My father returned earlier than expected and was surprised to find a babysitter there. When my mother came home tipsy, my father pointed a hunting rifle at her and demanded that she tell him who she'd slept with. Faced with a loaded gun, she ran to fetch me and used me as a shield. I cried for a year and when I stopped crying, order was restored.

Thus order began: with my silence.

Order lasted until the earliest of my memories.

Order looked like this: My father made himself scarce and my mother, resigned to her fate, took her medications (a rotation of sleeping pills and amphetamines) and turned to skin and bone.

Silence, in poetry, is what a Japanese poet many years later demonstrated as he served me tea. When he read his verses to me, his ordinarily hesitant, almost stuttering voice became beautiful and assured. I don't remember if his hand

kept cadence with the lines of his verse, but he had a way of pausing that made the silence rich and eloquent. It's a form of magic that I should have understood by dint of having droned its definition during my solfege exams: sixteenth rest, half rest, grand pause ... but nothing had penetrated my brain before that afternoon when Shikatani sat before me—two straight-backed chairs facing each other—and read a poem about wild salmon. His pauses were poignant and bore a tension that illustrated the vulnerability of the human voice. Once he had finished his poem, he became quiet and the atmosphere grew as troubling as death.

Poetry prefers communion to communication. This concept, which goes back to a Delphic sibyl, has its place in my story. While it is clear to me, it is received with suspicion by my poet friends. They think I'm goading them. They defend themselves and say, "In my case, I'm communicating!" Then I backpedal a bit, I stumble over my words and finally get all discombobulated as I realize that my concept of otherness is unreliable. I end up thinking that, in my little corner of the world, solitude is essential to the poet and that communion is a way to alleviate the isolation.

For me, the 'other' is a notion that begins with my brother. This in itself may be an illustration of my problem with the other poets.

As children, my brother and I had no 'organized activities.' He roamed the outside world with its fields, swimming holes and friends, while I, his perfect foil, felt obliged to guard the fort where abandoned items languished under the furniture, where piles of dirty laundry fermented and where my drug-addled mother slept. For a reason concealed from us and related to my father's mafia activities, in this suburb excited by the rapid influx of household appliances, we did not have a telephone. Although this object appeared in my parents' wedding picture, years of careless omission meant that I spent the greater part of my childhood in a house with no telephone, no record player and no television. Such things got broken and getting them repaired would

have forced my parents to enter into contact with the outside world.

I remember the day my mother sent me to the neighbours across the way to call the grocer. I froze before the device. The housekeeper (her name was Irene) understood my consternation and showed me how to dial the number. Everything had to be explained to me: You put your finger in the hole over the number, move the dial clockwise and let it rotate back into place. I was maybe nine years old. To this day, my shame remains intact.

On rainy days, my brother stayed in his room doing science experiments with paraffin, ashes and coins. As his assistant, I remained seated and did not interfere. If I made the mistake of disturbing him, I was banished to my room, where I spent the rest of the morning watching a spider toiling between two window frames.

As a poet, I benefit from reliving those bleak silences. Contrary to the idea that a person learns his craft through self-expression, my condition is more deeply connected to the silence that was imposed on me. Denying me the right to speak is what turned me into a writer.

From my place before the keyboard, I revisit my childhood to rediscover the noteworthy phases and I play at bringing them to life. I am a baby who replies, a toddler who debates, a boy who foretells. I envision my premature death, which is always spectacular, a tragic end that leaves my entourage in a bottomless pit of remorse, take one, take two ... I can do this with moments of which I have no memory at all, based solely on a photo or a story that I've heard.

When I enter into a photo, I stay for hours. The exercise

has yielded several strophes. Photographs speak to me like tarot cards.

There is only one picture in which we all appear together, my parents, my brother and me. Our one attempt at a family vacation: three days in the United States in 1968.

I usually spent the month of July sitting on the stoop, waiting for summer to end. I watched for passers-by so that I could say hello. Some did come by. My mother had started to do embroidery and my father frequently disappeared. When she'd had enough of his vanishing act, she demanded that he take us all on vacation. We spent three days in the U.S. where we played miniature golf, visited a theme park over which stood a colossal replica of Paul Bunyan, and took a boat tour on Lake George. Then we went home and 'family vacation' was crossed off the list, never to be spoken of again.

In our only family portrait, we're on the deck of the *Mohican*, a cruise ship that crisscrossed Lake George in upstate New York. Our group's pose is unnatural. My father rests one awkward, weary hand on my brother's shoulder and the other on mine. We're wearing tee shirts emblazoned with a fleur-de-lis and the word *Québec* in red beneath it and *la belle province* above. These identical outfits are highly unusual. They represent an act of self-identification: We were in the United States and wanted to display our difference proudly. My brother appears to be waiting patiently; he purses his lips. I look angry, a little sulky. I had probably been quarrelling with him earlier over the bar of chocolate I am holding with both hands. My mother has joined us, inserting her left arm into our trio. The angle of her hips

suggests that she wants to turn her back on us. My father is anchoring rather than holding her. She is thin as a rail, striking a pose. Wearing a scarf (it is windy on the boat) and white cat's-eye sunglasses. Playing the starlet. The only one smiling at the obliging tourist who took the picture. The stranger hadn't centered us in the frame: The left half of the portrait is taken up by a sign flapping on a chain (does it say 'No Admittance?') and rendered illegible by the strong wind.

I remember now that my mother was the one who asked the tourist to take the picture, just as she was the one who insisted that we take a family vacation. These demands, born of being sick and tired of the marginal life our father made us lead, did not continue. Normal activities were laborious. We didn't recognize ourselves in them. Despite moments of true pleasure, those three days took us so far from our daily grind that what I remember most is how strange they were.

When we got back from the United States, my mother got a job and the following year, she packed her bags and never looked back, driven by a critical force. She left everything behind.

I enjoy describing photographs.

Describing soothes me.

The inventory reassures me.

Our sole family photo leaves the impression that we were obliged to be there. It may well have been the last flare of the phosphorus before it died, but the result is still rather drab.

When I cannot explain, I tell. When I cannot tell, I pray. Praying is the noble form of my silence.

I return to my idea of communion. The poet does not transact with others; he relinquishes his poems the way people in the 19th century used to abandon their children in the public square, hoping that some kind soul would take responsibility for them. He *exhibits* his poems in the church courtyard before dawn.

In this loss is found his salvation and his cross.

I'm not a fan of celebratory poetry. Reading a love poem to the woman for whom it is written is a transaction that doesn't inspire me. Instinct makes me fear whatever keeps life at a distance. I struggled too long against it not to know that pleasure, pure and simple, is crucial to my journey. I learned this somewhat late in life, but I am partial to living things.

The subject of the celebration is loved, kissed, showered with attention, wine on Sancerre and dined on *fettuccine alle vongole*, bathed in attentiveness. Put it on a piece of paper? To what end? To subjugate the sentiment? Tame the exuberance?

When you love, you love. Period.

I do, however, remember thinking that a poem could find an honourable place in a spell or a curse: to name the thing or seduce the subject.

The poem as currency.

And I am touched by any literature, be it panegyric or not, that is based on the story of a failure; I am touched by the poem that gives shape and rhythm to rejection.

The poem born of a love that never came to pass.

Take, for example, Jean-Pierre Roy in a school in Varennes in the middle of the 1970s. In high school biology class, the two of us worked as a team. The rich schools dissected live mice and gave the students an entire afternoon to complete the procedure, whereas our school had purchased two barrels of pickled bullfrogs. The little beasts

were as rigid as a rubber tire and wore a band around one foot to help us identify our amphibian from one period to the next. As the days passed, we removed a lung or a kidney, and at the end of the week, we filled the skin back up, helping ourselves from the ocean of viscera. We rewound the threadlike small intestine and then turned our attention to the descriptive questionnaire.

Jean-Pierre Roy was the first of a type that would dog me for a long time: the good buddy, blithely radiant and superior. The extraordinary man who deigns to grant me his attention. He had Tintin's good looks: pale-skin, pink lips, blue eyes, reddish-blond hair. He was the one who directed the operations on the rubbery innards of our *Rana catesbeiana*. I did the writing. I didn't say much.

We were quick and enthusiastic, and finished in a few minutes what we had been given an hour to do. The rest of the time was dedicated to talk of Jean-Pierre's personal preferences. About his ping-pong paddle—a Jelinek, the best brand. About his ten-speed bike—a Peugeot, the most expensive. And it was on this Peugeot that he had hurtled down a hill, taken a tumble and broken his clavicle. With one finger, he pulled the collar of his polo shirt aside to reveal his abnormally thick collarbone (a result of the bone's healing) and its bizarrely dark-pink scar.

“Why is it that colour?”

He raised his eyes with a compassion that was a somewhat theatrical response to my ignorance and said, “It's normal.”

He stayed like that, with his collar stretched out, his eyes in the air, and then he began to sigh, the way he did when I was slow to grasp what he was explaining to me.

“Well,” he said.

“Well what?”

“Touch it!”

I didn't dare. It was too intimate. We were still in class. He insisted and I obeyed so that we could move on to something else. I placed my finger flat against the pink scar, the way you would press a doorbell. Naturally, he burst out laughing. Then he said more firmly, “Feel it. See how thick it is.”

I pinched the bone along its length. It really was thicker than average. The new skin was thin and dark pink.

He told me how they'd had to put a pin in it because apparently it was impossible to put a plaster cast on it. I grimaced and he delighted in my empathy.

Once, in the schoolyard (were we in line for a game of tetherball?), he invited me to spend the weekend at his house. Caught off guard, I was unable to respond and my hesitation was understood as a yes. We took the same bus home from school. I got off at Fatima, a far-flung parish in Longueuil; he continued on to Saint-Lambert, a town with a reputation for being populated by snobs.

On Friday night, on the bus that should have taken me to Saint-Lambert to spend the whole weekend with Jean-Pierre Roy, I sat transfixed, my forehead white and my hands damp, and I felt my arteries pulsing in my throat. If I was going to sleep in his room, sooner or later I would have to undress. He would too. I wasn't imagining anything. I knew only one thing: What lay ahead of me seemed too much like death.

When we reached my stop, instead of staying on the bus and continuing on to his house, I ran toward the exit

as if my life depended on it. Jean-Pierre jumped up from his seat.

“Hey, what are you doing? We’re going to my house!”

Realizing that he had gotten upset in front of the others, he quickly sat down and tried to look casual.

I fled and spent the weekend not thinking about him. I took advantage of every silence, of the boredom and idleness. I was safe but my inner world was a murky pond seething with pallid beasts.

Therein lies the basis of my sexual attraction to sameness: a very hard clavicle in the lingering odour of formaldehyde. As for my taste in girls, the scent is different. I remember a time when Diane C. was the focus of my epistemophilic curiosity, playing the role of the frog. With a scent all her own.

People’s odours educate me. As much as their words or their faces do. Smelling someone’s skin does not disappoint. For example, this childhood memory of sleeping with my mother. As kids, my brother and I would jump out of bed at the crack of dawn: he’d run outside and I, starving and weary of trying to be quiet so as not to awaken her, would join my mother in her bed where I’d fall back to sleep in her feverish warmth and her salty smell, redolent of cigarettes and sour milk. Sleeping with her until noon became a routine, and then the rule.

We were children, Diane C. and I. I remember her dark but lively brown eyes and her skin that was tan all year round, as if her ancestors had all been Mohawk. She embodied the image that I had of the Iroquois: capable of violence and generosity.

One day, in response to one of my notes, she used a

slingshot to hit me with a rock. She took aim, her eye mischievous and her tongue sticking out, and then stretched the elastic in the wrong direction. Everything happened so fast. She launched the stone into her own eyebrow.

She was a good person. She was flexible, accommodating, and you didn't have to beg for long before she'd strip naked. Even in broad daylight. Even that time on the back stoop where we'd been taken by surprise. She was lying on her back without any clothes on, offering her body to science. The experiment of the day involved me putting my nose on her vulva and inhaling just to see what it was like.

My mother appeared behind the screen door with a basket of laundry.

“What're you two up to now?”

“An experiment.”

“You could've at least hidden so no one would see.”

Diane C. pulled up her underpants and my mother began hanging the clothes up to dry without further comment.

After that, I kept my distance from Diane C., not because of our aborted experiment but because of what happened the following Sunday.

We rarely visited my paternal grandparents. They had this sort of luxurious estate on the shores of Lac Saint-Pierre. On the mailbox, which was set into an opening in the line of cedars, my grandfather's name was preceded by 'Hon.' for Honourable, a vestige of his years in politics during Duplessis's reign. Basically, one might have assumed that, according to proper society, my father had definitely married beneath his family's expectations. He had met some girl when she was sixteen, maybe even younger, and

when she got pregnant, he had married her in order to avoid prison. (He was almost thirty and in those days, the crime was crudely called ‘enticement of a child’). My mother was politely received even though she was half English, suspected of the greatest vulgarity and perceived as an error in judgement for which my father would pay the rest of his life. On top of that, she was as beautiful as a movie star among twelve mannish sisters-in-law and smoked instead of helping with the dishes.

While my brother and I, along with a cousin who was also there, went to the water’s edge in search of tadpoles, my parents stayed to chat in the large kitchen. We were usually invited to stay for supper.

One of those Sundays, after the meal, I was told to go to the bathroom before we got back on the road, and when I returned to the immense kitchen, all the adults—my honourable grandfather, my grandmother, my mother and father, everyone—looked at me with a knowing smile. It seemed bizarre, very bizarre to see my mother sympathizing with her in-laws. Why was she all of sudden one of them? The peculiar nature of this portrait so surprised me that I froze like a deer in the headlights.

I asked what was going on and no one answered. Grown-ups don’t answer children. Someone murmured something and chuckled.

No one had to tell me: My mother had spilled the beans. Now everyone knew about my experiment with Diane C.

My mother was beaming. I had just become the topic of conversation. She allowed me to take her place. My sexuality, and not hers, was henceforth the subject of anecdote in Honourable’s family. I was marked; I was a lascivious child.

My mother's revelation was indeed amusing but I found it extraordinarily humiliating. I became secretive. From then on, all intimate desires would be kept confidential. Clandestine. Many years would pass before I would rediscover the scent of the female sex that Diane C. had offered, that thrilling peppery smell that left me pensive, that tickled the nether portion of my spine and reminded me of my sleeping mother's fingers.

Translator's Notes



Translations of Bible verses taken from the New King James version.

The line adapted from Anne Hébert's poem, "There is Certainly Someone," was translated by F. R. Scott in *Lords of Winter and of Love: A Book of Canadian Love Poems in English and French*, Barry Callaghan, Ed. Exile Editions, 1983.

The line from Rimbaud's poem, "A Season in Hell," was translated by A.S. Kline. www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/Rimbaud3.php

"How easy it is to make a ghost": from Keith Douglas's "How to Kill." www.warpoets.org/poets/keith-castellain-douglas-1920-1944/

"...to admit any hope of a better world is criminally foolish, as foolish as it is to stop working for it.": *Douglas, Keith. The Letters of Keith Douglas*, Ed. Desmond Graham, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2000, p. 295. (The italics in the text are added by the author.)

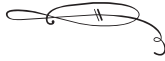
Francis Catalano's poetry collection *M'atterres* was published by Les Éditions Trait d'Union (Montreal) in 2002.

About the Author



Michael Delisle is a poet, novelist and the author of short stories whose works include six collections of poetry. He won the Prix Émile-Nelligan in 1987 and the Prix Adrienne-Choquette in 2005. His novel, *Le Feu de mon père*, won the 2014 Grand Prix du livre de Montréal and was a finalist for the Prix des libraires du Québec and the Prix littéraire des collégiens. He was a finalist for the Governor General award for French fiction in 2006 and again in 2014, for *Le Feu de mon père*. His recent collection of short stories, *Le Palais de la fatigue*, was a finalist for the 2018 Prix des libraires.

About the Translator



While continuing to pursue a career as a professional artist, American-born translator Kathryn Gabinet-Kroo earned a Certificate in Translation from McGill University and a Master's in Translation Studies from Concordia University. Working out of her Montreal artist's studio where she still paints, she translates contemporary French fiction by Quebecois and First Nations authors. Her translations include, among others: *Poacher's Faith*, *Hollywood*, and *A Fine Line* by Marc Séguin; *Paths of Desire* by Emmanuel Kattan; and *Amun*, a collection of short stories by Indigenous writers.