

Nicole Brossard

translated by
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*Fences in
Breathing*



*The dark suspends everything. There is nothing that can,
in the dark, become true.*

Alessandro Baricco

I often check my watch. Sometimes, on the luminous back of its face, I catch the reflection of my eyes. Since yesterday, something has slipped into my thoughts that has altered the course of time in such a way that, for reasons still unknown to me, I feel like slowly writing a book in a language other than my own. A way of avoiding short-circuits in my mother tongue, perhaps also of fleeing. Like a foreigner, I want to dive into the landscape of a temporary world where meaning parts meaning as I move through it. I am writing this book also as a way of not being soft and of seeing the horizon of fires heading our way.

I am everywhere I am. I am here to understand and to escape. I have put some distance between my mother tongue and reality. I am valiantly trying to imagine how pleasures and joys, fears and frights, can be built in a language not at all familiar. I am trying most of all to

understand how, with a vertical body, it is possible to impale the real at the same speed as fiction. Then, without falling apart, I let immensity softly softly drop its Nordic melancholy blueness upon my shoulders.

All around me, the vast kingdom of time past forces me to coexist with words unknown, words so harsh I hesitate to utter them, because speaking what one harbours makes a cold meal of the story of our very sincere lives.

I am constantly straining to keep urging life forward, that luminous and fascinating prey, and then I stay still for days at a time, surrounded by words and midnight graves. This time of urgency and vertigo forces me to heed what I call the *torment of grammar fast turning around into abyss*. That's how it is.

I will do what it takes to understand, but I'll need to streamline, to display the dark, embrace it, carve up its soul, in full daylight if need be.

Many before me have chosen to write in a language other than the one given them in childhood. Each time, the wind kept them suspended over a fertile void, bringing them neither farther from nor closer to the place where spirited children thirst to name everything. The world is always ready to seize our joys and pains and turn them into a landscape of its own. That world is perhaps nameless, unwritten, swallowed just in time by a number of dawns and dusks unappeased by languor and by reason.

Years went by and never did I feel the gloom settle into my daily gestures. Nothing at the root of my thoughts made it possible to foresee a darkening that was not just periodic and minor. Then one day, barely perceptible in the landscape, a little amoeba-shaped birthmark, an obscuring of houses, trees, passersby, women and their children. A feeling of both menace and tenderness, as sometimes happens while writing a biography, or when holding the hand of a stranger.

There is black on the horizon, a surface that does not reflect light and steals space from the very precious volume of life that is a child's arms, the foliage of tall, feathery trees, the turquoise surface of the water at the foot of glaciers. In my language, I have exhausted the vocabulary that would have allowed me to name that intriguing, approaching black: raven, vulture, feline, the black of volcanic sand, of marble, of ink and soot, of leather, of cassocks, of niqab and chador, and of burnt corpse. I need other words for this darkness of nature and civilization now encroaching.

When travelling, I still occasionally dream, but with ever smaller images, hard to pinpoint, like miniatures composed of countless illegible letters, assembled on a tenuous surface as if a world were about to be erased, but one whose disappearance remains as yet unthinkable.

I am everywhere I am. Nowadays, a lot of words catch fire in my dreams, relieving me neither of my mother

tongue nor of the other one already altering my thoughts, I know, making me even more despondent than I was.

Something silent goes through me when I think of the foreign language. Like on the day I met with a friend at a restaurant where meals were served and eaten in total darkness. Keeping your eyes closed or open made no difference. Our every word and gesture sank into a blackness both opaque and nameless that I chose to describe as friendly because it presented itself like a playful invention for refining the senses. There was nothing frightening about that blackness; it was part of a realm that had so far escaped my sensory experience. Like everybody, I'd gotten used to the semi-darkness of cities and believed it offered a joyful alternative to the night. That day, I had to learn to breathe deeply, to eliminate those little fences of resistance that, in normal circumstances, take my breath away and make me paw the ground with desire and anguish.

Nobody seeks darkness, nobody enjoys seeing the times darken. I know nothing of the dark. Then suddenly it appears, a feline finding its spot in the daily life of beliefs. Now it is my turn to go toward it, to get closer and search its soul with the invisible part of my own, which, since yesterday, has started to come alive in a foreign language.

SKETCHBOOK

I don't believe in events enough to write stories.

Joë Bousquet

For a few days now I've been living at the château and sleeping in a canopy bed. In truth it's a theatre, with curtain, dais, valance, festoons, fringes and tassels that make me anxious. All this leaves me feeling disoriented and propels me into thinking about a cycle of birth, death and procreation. Arena of the old masters, the poster bed shelters frightening rituals. Certainly the bed is deeply ridiculous, but this does not make it insignificant. It acts as memory by recalling the obligation of continuity and legacy so that, *bang*, blood continues to flow in the name of lineage and survival. In my language, *royal bed* and *one-night stand* designate common places to discuss reproduction. At the château, time has run in a straight line, carefully smoothing sharp edges, bad tempers, affronts and exchanges, and even the cold, which, when it penetrates too deep into flesh, raises it just enough to cause fears and shivers. The room is large and only the two small side tables from the

1950s calm me down a little. Tatiana must have bought them after acquiring the château. In the afternoon, I walk in the rose garden. Sometimes I smoke a cigarette. In the distance, the mountains draw curves in the paleness of the day. I think about the words I'd like to use but cannot be said in my language. Wind, always, shakes the roses.

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While soaping her mother's back, Laure talks to her slowly, softly. The sponge is soft. When she makes a fist, her hand wraps around it completely, then the sponge springs back to its original shape, a dishevelled little animal. Laure, the cool urban lawyer, has settled in the village among forgotten childhood girlfriends and strangers who, like her, work for a multinational or a government, or for their own interests. Summer evenings, she can be seen walking in the little wood or sitting in the garden, a cigarette in one hand, a glass of white wine in the other. By day, after helping her mother with her morning routine, she dives into an analysis of every word in the Patriot Act. Laure the urbanite can remain thus for hours, poring over texts that make the law; then, at the end of the day, she goes back to her mother, prepares her meal, bathes her, fixes her hair, kisses her and bids goodnight to this woman from whose womb she emerged forty years ago like a nice cliché.

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Every morning around eight o'clock, bells ring. A few strikes of the gong and the sky lights up, starts to move, trembles. I can barely control my excitement about fully comparing, for example, the birds' discreet song with the wind's whistling through the leaves. The air is fresh on my skin. A plane flies by in the distance. I don't see it; only its shipwreck sound reaches me. Since September 11, planes are bombs, *trompe l'oeil* tombs in the sky, and I have lost some of that happiness, which, while it was never quite tranquility, nonetheless left me with joy deep in my soul, certain that the world and the meaning of my life could not so readily fall apart. Ever since then, words can no longer rise to the task of consolation. So I throw myself upon *village* and *château*, still making very sure to not get too estranged from the word *literature*. This one I keep at the core of my silence, that beautiful lush space suspended over the void.

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Today, as he heads to the post office, Charles's step is a worried one. A nervousness in the movement of the arms, short steps and a sharp gleam in his eye. Charles, the woodworker, the sculptor, the sketch artist who for twenty

years has amassed objects whose function, he says, is to show what men are capable of: inkwells, astrolabes, globes, pens, chandeliers, perfume atomizers, chairs named after kings and emperors, old Remingtons and Olivettis. In the last five years, his workshop has also been filling up with first-generation cellphones and laptops. Empty Southern Comfort bottles stand side by side with beautiful old-fashioned crystal carafes and the Lilliputian armoires he has sculpted from oak and whimsy. The man spends his time between the workshop and the post office, where he always has forms to fill out. It's a five-minute walk to the post office. The view of the valley is magnificent: vineyards, fields of sunflowers and corn unfurling a mix of yellow, brown and green that floods the gaze with a stream of light likely to penetrate the soul with the speed of a fox. Today Charles is afraid. His left hand, covered in scars, trembles when he is close to June. In my language, I can see the trembling very clearly. Now, I don't know more than that. June is beautiful in both languages.

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I arrived at the château on the Wednesday preceding the incident. I was coming to meet Tatiana Beaujeu Lehmann, retired publisher. A woman still sprightly, generous, who single-handedly carried an entire body of literature at a

time when it seemed about to give way to another one, produced in a language so foreign that even today nobody seems to have figured out what was at stake. In time, the other literature nevertheless won out. So Tatiana Beaujeu sold her publishing house and ended all dealings with most of the people who surrounded her with their half-truths. For half-truths had become common currency to explain reality, as if everything had the same value, *glass half full*, *glass half empty* acting as an example now to exalt the empty part, now to praise the full part. One never said *half-lie*, never. Nevertheless, people swallowed everything they could from the little goblet of lies. Half-truths flew off in one direction, then, having morphed into rumour, gossip and *narrative* lethal to all men and women who continued to dream of a better world, flew back like a poisoned arrow straight at the heart of their thoughts.

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Yes, his hand was trembling. The foreign woman's gaze drifted over his fingers, then he felt it wrap round his wrist. At that precise moment, Charles's hand began to tremble. Even after holding his hand around the handle of a heavy hammer for a long time or after carving the shape of his solitude a thousand times into the belly of a tree, he had never trembled. No, that had never happened, and

now it started to at the very moment June spoke to him to enquire about his sister, who so craved to live in the Svalbard archipelago in northern Norway. Suddenly there was a whirlwind of triangles in which he distinguished the faces of June and his sister, then another triangle formed with the silhouettes of Laure and the foreign woman. Both times he thought he saw his own shadow in the midst. But it was not him, he knew it was not him. Now his hand was no longer trembling, and he entered the post office. 'What a wind!' the employee said while looking for a form in the bottom drawer of a desk. 'What a wind!' Charles repeated with a worried look.

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The château is home to Tatiana and her personal secretary, who takes care of everything, including the letter, received six months ago, inviting me to stay at the château in exchange for a few conversations and reflections on the current state of the world. 'Fewer and fewer people will go to libraries in search of their dignity,' said Tatiana. 'I need all this explained to me.' The publisher had bought the château in the middle of the twentieth century. There are a thousand and one little reminders of America in the fifties: drinking gin, rye and whisky, as people did over there back then, must have occurred a lot here as well. The

staircase and the bedroom floors are covered in thick white carpet always just about to turn from pearl to yellow, from yellow to the grey in the air. On each side of the bed, a little table like those once found in the rooms of great hotels. When I stretch out my arm, I can press a series of buttons, launch an opera aria or a jazz tune, summon an imaginary employee via intercom, set the alarm or light the bed. It was the beginning of a new era, and owning a château did not prevent one from decorating it American-style. Tatiana is from another time, she represents what was most brilliant, generous and liberal in a bygone world fuelled by the pleasure of books, by socialism, by the soothing silence of leisurely strolls and the joys of conversation. At eighty-five, Tatiana has a sharpness of mind that can cut through umbilical cords and black thoughts with a single reply. To me, Tatiana speaks only about literature and writers she has known. Never about war, nor the Great Depression, nor the Holocaust, nor about science. But she leaves me free to talk about Québec's Quiet Revolution and about September 11. And every time this happens, I am surprised that the fact that she is all at once Jewish and Russian, a Québécoise and a New Yorker, helps me to compose in the foreign tongue.

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