





Jacques Poulin

# Translation is a Love Affair

*Translated from the French by Sheila Fischman*

*archipelago books*

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This story, though rather short, did not come easily. I was lucky that Pierre Filion was watching over my shoulder.

J. P.



*In the final analysis, it really is about a couple, and the matter under discussion is love. Yes, we are talking about translation, which is defined first of all as a transport. Transport of language or transport of love.*

ALBERT BENSOUSSAN

*Translation and Creation*



Translation is a Love Affair



# I

## An Obese Cat

Naked as a trout, I was stepping out of the pond, each hand holding a bunch of weeds, when all at once I saw my cat with her head down, making a dash toward something small and black coming down the hill that leads to the chalet.

When she was watching her territory, old Chaloupe pretended to be asleep on the picnic table which is halfway between the chalet and the pond. Now an intruder had appeared partway down the hill, and she was rushing toward him with her belly to the ground. I am a translator, I love words, and if I say *belly to the ground*, it's not a figure of speech: her belly was quite literally dragging along the ground.

The intruder was a skinny young cat as black as a stove. When he saw the obese cat coming toward him, he leaped off the road, darted across the lawn, and disappeared into the bushes that line my property. Chaloupe abandoned the chase and scurried

back to her observation post. Her belly swayed from side to side with every step.

Monsieur Waterman came out of the chalet. He had woken up earlier than usual. I put my bikini back on and a T-shirt over it, but without rushing. To tell me that he'd witnessed the pursuit, he mimed with his hips the obese cat's undulating movement and made a funny face. Usually I don't have much confidence in men, but for him I made an exception. Despite being twice my age he was my best friend though we hadn't known each other very long. He's a writer and he'd started a new novel.

As for me, I'd started to translate one of his novels, the one that talks about the Oregon Trail. If there was a way to get close to someone in this life – of which I was not certain – it might be through translation.

It was Saturday and we both had the day off. He had left the Tour du Faubourg in Quebec City to spend the weekend at the chalet with me. The month of May had barely started, the water in the pond was freezing. The Île d'Orléans is always cooler than the city. I was glad to see the leaves coming out and the days getting longer, because the winter had been harsh. Several times heavy snowfalls had blocked the dirt road, forcing me to get around by snowmobile.

## II

### The Recorded Voice

Before he got into his blue Toyota 4 x 4, which he called *the Coyote*, Monsieur Waterman called out my name.

“Marine?”

“Yes!”

“I’m going to buy the papers!”

It was the beginning of the afternoon. The writer had taken a nap and during that time I’d gone back to removing the weeds from the pond. This time in a bikini.

My name is Marine. It’s a softer version of *Maureen*, the name of my Irish mother. I have inherited her red hair, her green eyes, her mood swings. Do you remember Maureen O’Hara’s fits of temper in John Ford’s film *The Quiet Man*? She was the spitting image of my mother.

At the top of the dirt road the Coyote drove out of sight. The sun, which had come up on that side, was now past the tops of the trees and it was warming the chalet, the pond below, and,

at the back of the property, the lush plot of land that I called “Where Murmurs Meet.”

The pond, which was oval, measured around twenty-five meters by fifteen. A wooden dock on piles (Monsieur Waterman called it a jetty) had been built at the end closer to the chalet. Everywhere on the shore shrubs, bulrushes, and flowers grew wild. I’m a little bit wild myself if you must know. I always do what I want. The only rules I accept are the rules of grammar. I’m comfortable in water, I swim like a fish, weaving my way through the weeds that are left.

Those damn weeds: there’s no end to pulling them out. They proliferate, they practically multiply before your eyes. Besides making the water cloudy and even slimy, they’re a threat to anything that lives in and around the pond – trout, frogs, bullfrogs, dragonflies, kingfishers, herons, raccoons.

That day, I devoted an hour to the task and it gave me as well the vague impression that I was doing some cleaning up in my love life: I’m a great psychologist. Meanwhile, Monsieur Waterman had come back with the papers. He brought out his chaise longue (an orange and green Lafuma) and settled down at the edge off the pond as usual. I saw him open *Le Devoir* and become absorbed in the book section, letting the rest of the paper fall onto the grass. He read all the book reviews. I could hear him griping about the use of the expressions *d’entrée de jeu*, *au niveau*

*de* and, in particular, *incontournable*, but he still read every article through to the end.

To impress him, I took a run up on the jetty and dove into the water, which is two meters deep in that spot. The bullfrogs, panicking, hid beneath the stones, and the trout glided elegantly through the weeds. Holding my breath, I swam to the other end without coming up. If there had been reeds at the end of the pond I would have chosen one and used it to breathe underwater, as Robert Mitchum had done in an adventure film I'd seen when I was little. Monsieur Waterman would have worried about me, would have thought I was drowning.

No reeds in sight and no hollow-stemmed plants either, so I got out of the pond, probably red in the face, and took a good gulp of air. He wasn't even looking at me! The book section was more interesting than the exploits of an Olympic swimmer . . . I climbed onto the shore, slipping on the clay bottom, of course, and while I was drying off in the sun, a plaintive mewling drew my attention.

The feeble cry was coming from the row of shrubs that marked the limit of the property. As soon as I got near, the young black cat emerged from a raspberry bush. He was thin, his left ear was torn, and he was taking frightened looks all around. When I turned my head I spotted Chaloupe at her post on the picnic table. She seemed to be truly asleep. I got down on

my knees in the wild grass and the little cat advanced toward me, his tail in a question mark. When I picked him up to show him to Monsieur Waterman, I saw that he had a dark blue leather collar around his neck.

“See what I found,” I said.

“Look, he has a collar,” he observed, stroking the cat’s head. “That means he belongs to someone.”

“That’s right.”

“Did you see the phone number?”

“Where?”

All too happy to have found the cat, I’d paid no attention to the brass disk attached to the collar. I was ashamed of myself. Mind you, it was only one and a half centimeters long.

The number was engraved on the disk.

“I’ll go and phone,” I said eagerly.

Chaloupe was still asleep on the picnic table, but everyone knows that cats sleep with one eye open. I took a detour and went inside through the back door.

The telephone was in the kitchen. As soon as I set him down, the cat headed for old Chaloupe’s bowls. I gave him a big handful of dry food and a bowl of cold water, then I dialed the number on the collar. I heard three rings, then the next one was interrupted by a female voice. A recorded voice that sounded

very young. It said: "Leave me a message and maybe I'll call you back."

The word *maybe* had a strange effect on me, especially because the voice sounded like my dead sister's. I simply hung up without a word.

### III

## Dead Leaves

We met in a cemetery, Monsieur Waterman and I. Some people might see that as a bad omen, but not me: my mother is buried there. My grandmother too.

It was fall and I was coming back from a journey.

After my degree in translation, I'd thumbed a ride to the United States – he would say that I'd hitchhiked. I wanted to knock some sense into myself. By chance, my rides took me to Key West. Then I went to New Orleans, and from there to San Diego, along the Mexican border. California was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen, so I hung out, worked for a while picking fruit, and then very slowly, taking the road along the ocean, I went to San Francisco.

On a bulletin board at the City Lights bookstore was a notice from someone looking for a roommate, and I spent a few months in that city where the spirit of freedom and tolerance agreed with me. I could have taken as my motto a statement by

an American feminist who had written: “I feel the outline of the bay in my heart.” When a person is very happy or very unhappy, he becomes super-sensitive to what is going on around him, to the people and even to the atmosphere.

I was very happy, floating on a cloud almost, when I left San Francisco in a camper with a retired couple returning to Quebec. We crossed the United States diagonally. At Scott’s Bluff in Nebraska, if I remember correctly, we found a museum devoted to the conquest of the west. On my way out of the museum something happened that I won’t forget in a hurry.

Just next to the main building, with no fence to protect them, were some deep ruts left in the ground by the wheels of the covered wagons that a century and a half earlier had brought emigrants to the promised land of Oregon. I took a few steps by myself in those ruts. Thousands of people had passed that way, their hearts swollen with hope, and my own heart began to beat faster simply because I was following in their footsteps. I was so deeply affected that I seemed to hear an indistinct murmur behind me; for a moment I thought that a caravan of ox-carts was following me.

When I came back from San Francisco, I couldn’t find any interesting work. So I applied for and won a scholarship allowing me to enroll in the School of Translation and Interpretation at the

University of Geneva. While I was there I took advantage of my free time to travel in neighboring countries.

One day when I was passing through Arles, in the Rhône Valley, I'd put down my backpack on a wharf. I was grappling with an attack of melancholy when I was approached very politely by a little man with a moustache who had thick grey hair and was smoking a pipe. After sharing his *jambon-beurre* sandwich and his coffee with me, he invited me for a cognac at a nearby bar. It's hard to believe but the bar was part of a bookstore and the bookstore was part of a publishing house. When he recognized my accent, the moustached man told me that the house had just co-published a Quebec novelist whose nom de plume was Jack Waterman. He was not one of my favorite authors. The moustached man gave me a copy of the novel, and I read on the back that it had something to do with the Oregon Trail. And then and there, I got the idea of translating Monsieur Waterman into English.

So there I was in a cemetery, the one connected with the former St. Matthew's Church in Quebec City. It was the first place I'd visited since I'd come home. I loved the low stone wall and the mighty oaks and maples that spread their branches all the way to the middle of rue Saint-Jean.

My mother and my grandmother were resting in the most secluded corner. I had shed my backpack and, with my back against the wall, I sat in the long grass strewn with dead leaves.

My grandmother was an orphan. She had left Ireland for Canada with her own grandparents, but they had come down with typhus on the ship and were buried on Grosse-Île. Later on, she died giving birth to my mother and eventually, my mother succumbed to cancer.

Now I was the orphan.

At my feet, in the corner where I was sitting, a tombstone lay in the grass with my grandmother's name, the two dates of her existence, and the three letters that say may she rest in peace. I am the only one who knows that my mother is resting beside her. One night I brought the urn, I dug a hole with a trowel – the correct French word is *transplantoir* – and poured the ashes into it. No one could see me, the cemetery had been abandoned long before.

With my chin on my knees and my back against the low wall, I thought about all that, and about my little sister, and suddenly I remembered that my mother used to love the rustling of dead leaves. For her pleasure, I got up and walked around the tombstone, dragging my feet through the oak leaves. That's what I had been doing when a middle-aged man appeared, carrying a

pile of books. He sat on a park bench ten paces from me, with the books on his knees.

Spotting me, he nodded, then smiled, but fleetingly, the way old people do who live shut away from the rest of the world or who fear being misjudged. I smiled back and he began to leaf through the first book on the pile. His gaunt face, his grizzled and badly trimmed beard, his narrow glasses that didn't hide the bags under his eyes, his extreme thinness, his melancholy appearance – all gave me a sense of *déjà vu*.

I went back to sit against the wall, thinking. Suddenly, he came over to me, holding the books against his chest, and mumbled:

“It’s rare to see anyone in this little corner of the cemetery . . .”

As I did not respond he made as if to go away. Then he changed his mind.

“I often stop here to take a break after I leave the library.”

“What library?” I asked.

He pointed to St. Matthew’s church.

“Didn’t you know that the church has been converted into a library?”

“No I didn’t,” I said, smiling.

“Did I say something funny?”

“It’s the verb *convert* . . . it’s perfect!”

“I hadn’t thought about that! . . . So, are you just back from a trip?”

“Yes. I came here to see my relatives.”

With a gesture as natural as possible, because I didn’t want to upset him, I pointed to the tombstone between us. He turned toward the grave without a word and bending forward, made a deep bow, still holding the books against his chest. After that he sat down beside me and put them between us.

The title of the book on top of the pile was *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. When I saw it a light came on in my head: the man sitting next to me with his back against the wall was Jack Waterman, the author I wanted to translate into English – the one who’d written a novel about the Oregon Trail! I remembered reading in an article that he practically worshipped Hemingway.

Too often in my short life something impelled me to do exactly the opposite of what I ought to do. It happened again. While I should have said: “Ah! You’re Monsieur Waterman! . . . My name is Marine, I’m a translator,” I stupidly pretended that I didn’t recognize him. I don’t know why I always behave like such an idiot. Choking back my shame, I inspected the books he’d just set down in the grass beside me. Aside from Hemingway’s stories there was *The Red Pony* by Steinbeck, a

biography of John Fante, and *Grammar Is a Sweet, Gentle Song*, by Érik Orsenna.

“Are you a reader?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“What are you reading at the moment?”

“Collections of letters. I’m reading Kafka’s to Milena, Chekhov’s to Olga, Rilke’s to Lou Andréas Salomé . . .”

“Why?”

“I have no idea.”

“Do you not read novels, narratives, short stories?”

“I’m quite fond of Modiano’s novels . . . Are you going to ask me why?”

“Yes.”

“His books are like life. They contain hazy memories, yellowed photos, vague feelings, songs from days gone by, chance meetings, conversations in cafés . . . And the reader has to put it all back together as if it were a puzzle.”

“Meaning that to you, life appears to be a story in separate parts?”

I nodded, even though I’d actually never thought about the matter. Monsieur Waterman was silent for a long moment. As for me, I blew gently on an ant that was travelling diagonally over Hemingway’s face, which was on the cover of the big book

of short stories. The insect then turned around, and I set the book in the grass to help it climb down.

Waterman looked at me more thoughtfully.

“Is your background Scottish like most of the people buried here?”

“No, it’s Irish.”

I said that with a pride that was unusual for me.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I should have known.”

He smiled and his mischievous expression scrutinized my mop of red hair, my freckles, and my green eyes. I thought about my sister who’d had the same appearance.

“What do you do when you’re not travelling, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I’m a translator.”

There, it was out. I should have added that I was very interested in the possibility of translating his novels into English, but I didn’t: it seemed indecent. It was more appropriate to wait for an invitation.

That day, I waited in vain. Instead of an invitation, what I received was a quotation from Borges. The one that every translator knows and remembers at night when they can’t sleep, tormented by the groundless fear that they’re living the life of a parasite. “The art of translation is perhaps more subtle and

more civilized than the art of writing. Translation is a more advanced stage.”

Then Monsieur Waterman looked at his watch. He picked up his books and got to his feet, supporting himself on the stone wall with one hand. After a nod that was intended as much for my relatives as for me, he left the cemetery. Seen from the back, with his stooped shoulders, he looked very frail. The dead leaves barely crunched beneath his feet.

## IV

### The Best Translator in Quebec

After my visit to the cemetery, I started to look for an apartment. I didn't have much money left and my few friends were scattered to the four corners of the world, so I took a room at the least expensive establishment: the youth hostel at 19 rue Sainte-Ursule.

Since I had to earn a living, I offered my services to several organizations as a freelance translator. While I waited for replies, I started to put into English the Waterman novel I'd been given by the publisher in Arles: besides testing my abilities, I wanted to see if we shared any tastes.

As my room was small and assailed by the noise of my neighbors, I got in the habit of working in public libraries. The closest was the one at the Institut Canadien, with its front entrance on rue Sainte-Angèle. Right next door was the Morrin College library, which was quiet and very poignant with its honey-colored paneling, the smell of the old books, the

spiral staircase, the long polished-wood mezzanine, the desk that had belonged to Sir George Étienne Cartier. The building had once been a prison and when the wind from the northeast made the walls moan, I thought I could hear the prisoners who had languished in the cells underground.

But it was in the St. Matthew's library near the cemetery that I spent most of my time. I may as well admit it, I hoped I would see Monsieur Waterman again and, without being obvious, get his opinion about my translation. I had it all worked out in my head: I would pretend not to see him, he'd come up to me and read over my shoulder what I'd written; very impressed, he would invite me to his place and immediately phone his publisher.

Sitting at the big table at the rear with my back to the nave of the church, I just had to look up and I could see new arrivals. My big Webster's dictionary formed a rampart behind which I hid the snack I always brought in case I was suddenly hungry.

One morning around eleven the writer makes his entrance. I put the apple I've just bitten into back in my bag and quickly hide his novel under my rough draft. Opening a dictionary, I turn my attention to a search that is as professional as possible. I'm the best translator in Quebec, publishers in London, New York and Toronto fight over my services, and no newcomer is going to distract me from my work.

When I feel a hand on my shoulder, I jump – the appropriate reaction. Monsieur Waterman apologizes sotto voce for frightening me. I tell him not at all, then he asks if I live in the neighborhood.

“At the youth hostel, but that’s temporary, I’m looking for another place.”

“What kind?”

“A quiet place with trees and birds. And maybe a cat.”

“May I sit down for a moment?”

“Sure.”

He takes a seat across from me.

“I’m going to think about your accommodation problem.”

“Thank you.”

“This is a good place to work, isn’t it?”

He looks up and gazes at the ogival windows on our left where the sunlight is setting the stained glass ablaze. I start getting nervous because of the novel hidden under my scratchpad.

“What are you translating?” he asks.

The words get stuck in my throat. Unable to answer I have no choice but to shift my pad so that he can see his book. His reaction surprises me: he stays perfectly calm. Acts as if it were perfectly normal. As if I were a real pro and had signed a proper contract with a publisher in Toronto. I am won over, if you must know, but showing it to him is out of the question.

Feigning indifference, I hand him what I've written. Very slowly, he reads a dozen pages. Now and then he goes back and re-reads something. Time stops. The visitors to the library move like film characters in slow motion. Finally, he hands it back.

"Bravo! You've captured the little melody."

A glimmer in his eyes tells me that he really believes what he says. And he asks,

"Tell me how you work."

"Well, I choose simple, concrete words . . . I try to make short sentences and as much as possible, I avoid inversions. I don't place a very short word next to one with a number of syllables . . . If a word ends with a consonant I find a companion that starts with a vowel. And I read it aloud to hear how it sounds. The problem though is . . ."

"I know," he says. "The *mot juste* in English isn't necessarily the one that harmonizes best with its neighbors."

"That's right! And then the melody isn't the same."

"It doesn't matter. The main thing is that it's the same tone. By the way, what's your name?"

"Marine."

"Dear Marine, what matters most in literature is the tone. Which no one ever talks about. It's nearly as important as green eyes and freckles!"

He bows his head to me, half-rises, then sits down again.

“Ah! I know someone from whom you could rent a chalet on the Île d’Orléans. It’s fairly primitive, very basic, but one can live there year round. The chalet is hidden by a small forest at the end of a dirt road. There’s a pond with all kinds of trout and bullfrogs, and there are no neighbors nearby.”

“If it’s isolated I’d need a car.”

“Yes. But I know someone who has an old Jeep.”

“I don’t have any money.”

“That doesn’t matter, I know someone who does.”

Monsieur Waterman was smiling, he had an answer for everything. I was beginning to think that it was my lucky day. Do you know the proverb that goes: *When in doubt, do nowt?* There’s an Irish version, composed by me, that says: *When in doubt, put your head down and charge!*

No more questions, I told Monsieur Waterman that I accepted. On condition that I pay my rent and reimburse him for all his expenditures. I wanted to keep my independence.