

Unfinished, alive

Pierrine Poget

Novel

French



With "Unfinished, alive", the poet Pierrine Poget offers an experience of the body, both the female body and bodies in general, in the minutiae and turmoil of the sensations of adult life.

"There is no life without struggle, no existence that, passing through all possible states, does not add its tumult to that of others before finding its place."

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Pierrine Poget was born in Geneva in 1982. She has released three volumes of poetry, including *Fondations*, which was published by Empreintes and won her the C.F. Ramuz poetry prize. *Warda s'en va*, her first work of prose, published by Éditions La Baconnière in 2021, was well received by critics and shortlisted for the Prix Médicis. *Inachevée, vivante*, published this year, is in the running for the Prix Jacques-Allano.

Photo: Irina Popa

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Excerpt translated by Michelle Bailat-Jones

The reasons are not enough, they know nothing.

I can only clarify – the names of locations, acts,
the many hesitations.

I have no idea what I'm to do with this note that I wrote,
that I no longer understand.

I am told that pressing charges will expose me to all kinds of
hassle but once the name is given minds change, I am encouraged,
there are other stories about him, if I give a statement, maybe
he can be arrested.

I say no twice.

"Think about it."

"I don't want to see him again."

I choose to make a report.

"How many times, how long?"

I don't tell everything.

"Did you yell?"

I don't know what this question is getting at.

The afternoon settles over the restaurant, the densely packed
jumble of tables; he stares at me from across the room. Unmoving,
a small white monkey, as thin as a rail. There is a large mirror
behind him. I don't know who I wanted to see when I turned in his
direction. But our eyes meet, and I don't know how to settle them
elsewhere. I'm afraid he'll come over if I drop my gaze, that I'd be
inviting him if I hold it. So I get up, drop money on the table and
leave, pushing the heavy curtain that stands in for the door, this
way I don't have to shift my eyes to get him out of my field of vision.
Once I'm outside, I head toward an open space, far from any walls
or the road, to be able to flee, so he can't block me against a
building facade or push me onto the sidewalk, it's ridiculous, I think,
no one follows a person after just a glance. But then I'm being
stopped, my arm grabbed, my shoulder. He passes me so he can
wheel around and face me. He wants to know where I'm going.

"I'm going home."

"And after?"

"To the movies."

He asks me what time, which film, I don't know how not to tell
him, and it doesn't cross my mind to lie, so I say when and
where, praying that he won't come.

At seven o'clock he's in front of the cinema, holding the door for me
and stepping up to the ticket window, asking for two tickets.

Then he pulls me aside. Up ahead I can see the doors opening onto
the darkness of the theatre, the previous film has ended and
the moviegoers are leaving, thoughts full, and I'd like to go with
them, to walk up and leave the building, hand-in-hand with their
conversations, to go outside while it's still daylight, head home or
go for a walk, but out of his sight. He guesses my thoughts and
stands in the way, he does so without touching me; I'm the one who
stays still while the others are walking away. After, when we
go into the theatre, I don't know where he sits, what he does, if he
speaks, but he dirties everything with his dead eyes and inert
body, with his strange odor of death, he destroys the images I came
to see.

When we go out, it's right there on the pavement, right beneath the
streetlamps, bald and beautiful, the chance to say goodbye –
but I don't reach out for it. So off it goes, free and easy, choking
with life, while for me everything begins again as he falls in step,
his cadaver pressing after me into the city's scents and streets,
beneath the vines and beside a trickling fountain or sleeping
hedgerow, into the city filled with stairways and passersby, with
lindens and parks, things and bodies and brushings and touches;
all of which vanishes as we enter the bar. We drink and I say
nothing anymore of what I believe or think.

"I'd like to go home."

The hand that was touching me takes out some money, pays
for what we have consumed. Shining out from the end of the
street through the light rain is a sign for the Hotel T, its rotating
door like a beacon. I think of the windows in my room and the
colors of the balcony, its flowers and protective awning unfurled
like an ocean at noon or naptime. I think of what I love but I don't
walk toward it. What is about to take place has to occur elsewhere,
in a room provided and paid for, that can't be damaged, a room
of mercy made for errors that will accept all moments without
flinching. Nonetheless, oh how I love hotels and guest rooms, places
which pair the unknown and the intimate so well, a space in
which I have often knelt down, grateful for those who have opened
the doors to me and said: it is here you can rest.

The glass of the revolving door pushes at my back, hurling me into the light of the lobby. The room must be paid for in advance. I wonder where he's gotten the money he hands over. After that, I don't remember the path to the door, nor stairway or elevator, hallway or threshold, I remember only the shame, and that the door someone pushes is gray. Beyond the door there is carpet, a bed, and two nightstands, a mirror, a counter running below the mirror and an armchair like you might find in a dressing room, then a very small bathroom, and curtains on the windows.

Thinking on it today, I feel something for this room. We were in it together, keeping each other company, each of us containing something inviolable that he could not see. We both had other hours of our lives. Someone, either he or I, took off my sandals, I hope I was the one who undid the buttons of my dress, hope that he didn't touch them - there were sixteen running down my back, the very same ones from that noon when I went swimming in the lake and got dressed beneath the oak trees, struggling to slip the cotton over my damp skin before walking toward this meeting - if that's what this collision can be called, a "shock of two bodies, one of which is in motion" - walking with no plans and then spotting the restaurant where he was standing, this small, beastly man, doleful and weak, though strong with the power that, as unseen as it was definite, could prepare certain people for submission.

I am naked when he - still dressed - steps into the bathroom, leaving the door ajar, so I see him remove his clothes and then swear because his body is only half-heartedly responding. Other sounds come next, vulgar words. He returns, naked or dressed, I don't know, he opens the nightstand. What he can't accomplish himself, he orders me to do what he's doing.

I look at the mahogany nightstand.

"Show me."

Later, he has me stretch out in front of him, raise my hips.

"Get up. Higher, I don't see."

Having seen enough, he hits. I don't know this pain.

His face comes and goes in the room, a face of sickly muck, of boredom and ignorance, while night shuffles through the curtains and the wind stutters and whispers outside across the white terrace. He left the key on the table. It's too far. At dawn, I grant myself permission to go, leaving my address as he's requested. I don't even think of lying, even less of refusing.

I work in a shop. He walks through the door at noon, and the little bell - usually so pretty - rings and lets him in. I sell flowers, I am alone amid the bouquets, he steps behind the counter and, holding me by the back of the neck, he makes me understand how much I loved our night together. I say no. And so, tightening his fingers, he takes me to the back of the shop and pushes me against the mirror. "Look," he says.

"It's obvious."

He gives an address.

"I want you there at five o'clock."

"I can't."

"I don't care."

More specifically, "I don't care, because you will come."

And I stumble over this future tense.

"Close the shop."

The closed, white hour holds its breath, waits. He insists we go out. He wants to speak with me. So I slam everything, my heels, the drawers, the shutters over the back courtyard. "I don't have much time," I say.

"I have all the time in the world."

He starts with his childhood and tells me everything - how he grew up on the streets with his mother, around other prostitutes, out of school by the age of seven, about the jobs he'd worked, the crimes he'd committed and seen, his troubles, his accidents. He uses the word wealth once, talking of an aunt who had diamonds, he says it like a child, "diamonds", and other words that don't exist, that speak only of violence and poverty. He talks a long time, says he's hungry so we go to a restaurant, this time I have to pay because he doesn't have any more money. At four o'clock, we go back out onto the street, and he keeps droning on. I slap him. He pushes me. I fall off the sidewalk. A two-hundred-year-old tree looms above us. A tram is coming, he sees my fear and raises his voice to cover the sound of the wheels. Silhouettes move in the distance, and birdsong, but no lantern, no white whale, no mystery to lift me up.

"I've killed for less than that."

He holds out his hand.

"You deserved it."

He says he understands why I hit him.

"Five o'clock. I'll come by car."

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The bridge at Mantes (1868 - 1870), Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot

There is always a boat, a cap: a reason.
Limay, Mantes-la-Jolie...names of cities, of faces.

Rider in the woods (1850 - 1855), Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot

Lone figure, riding much more than a horse
- drawing support from elsewhere, from something else. White
ghost in a storm, held for a moment from falling (long moment of
exposure). Slow passion of the eye; a rider in the woods appearing
like a burn on the underside of the visible.

I, too, became a mother, and it was painting - specifically painting,
but other images, too - that showed me how this status affected
my life, what position it placed me in or compelled me to take.

On several occasions, different works of art opened my eyes to
certain realities whose degree of influence over me kept the
truth beyond my reach. The art forced me to recognize that things
around me had changed, that they were taking or had taken a
new turn, and that I needed to react otherwise I would find myself
on a platform watching the train draw away, with all the heart-
break this entailed. These little jolts pushed me from Camille Corot
to Édouard Vuillard to Berthe Morisot, and then from painting
toward a more recent era, to Heidi Bucher. Each time it was an
awakening. A disenchantment, too: whatever had been driving
my attention - the interest, the fascination that had been holding
me rapt for months - suddenly detached itself from me and
fell to the ground, lifeless, like the shedding of a skin. New images
unfurled into the gap made by the separation, their resonance
steadily increasing until I was able to understand what had brought
me to stop in front of them, what they had set into motion or got
moving again, what lifeforce they restored to me; they required my
absolute focus, so much so that the ones I had felt so close to a
moment before I now found obscure, even repellent.

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At the beginning it was Corot, when the child was inside me; his
shorelines and paths, his fields, the edges of his woods, all
beneath a sky that never reveals its hour. While I waited for the
child to come, I fueled myself with this extremely long day, with
the figures populating its scene. For more than two years, from
one birth to the next, I loved the suspended time of his paintings,

their unusual eternity which seemed to mirror my own and which I
refused to give up. I enjoyed returning to those settings and to
that light, to the same trees leaning over the same scenes, an end-
less and uncomplicated parade of painting after painting. One
must like repetition in order to feed and care, to cradle and bathe,
to get through the hours when sleeping is also watching over,
when presence and absence merge. Speaking to a customer who
was worried at the sight of so much foliage in a painting he had
ordered, Corot replied, "Rest assured, I work for small birds." This
was also my vocation: milk-filled nest and perch, offering not
branches for survival, but my complete attention. That this task
could make me unsteady didn't even cross my mind.

In Saint-Nicolas-les-Arras, Jacques Desavary took a photo of Corot
seated outside beside his easel. A parasol is open behind him -
white, like his artist's smock, scorched with light, curved and
massive. The handle can't be seen and so the parasol seems to
float, a kind of jellyfish or parachute. A painter's box lies open
on the earthen track behind him. Despite the abundance of sunlight,
the box throws no shadow. Something about the space or the
medium is false. Everything here is a vision. We are looking at
Corot's soul, fragile and powerful, at both sides of the moment,
imbued with truth and with doubt.

The Quai des Pâquis, Geneva (1842), Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot

The dark eyes suggest noon. The shadows
indicate a different hour. The lake, yet another. Many years later,
the *Dame en bleu* carries a memory of this quayside knotted at her
back - her dress, with its weighty bundle, curiously upright.

Calm, tummy full of milk, the child wears her crown in silence. At first, we keep her out of the sun. Not yet mobile, she does nothing. Slow whirlwind of ice and fire, she breathes like a stone. I spend hours watching the luminous pollen of her hair, then I look to the horizon where the future lies in wait. Relieved to see only landscape lines, I turn back to these colors in the shadow of the sheets. Again and again, I turn her hand in mine, over, under, like a wing I cannot understand. She sleeps and wakes, reaches out for unknown faces. I tell her everything will be fine, I promise her everything. She is without premonition and becomes her own self in sleep.

Get her into the outfit, take her out: everything comes to her in the same way; turned toward the wall, she also likes this clarity. On her back, she contemplates the green stained-glass window of the fig tree, its broad hands of light. One day, she is anointed with water from a jug. She receives blessings. Then I carry her into the house and put her back to sleep. The darkness in the room doesn't come from the curtains but from our intimacy, from the softness of her head and the fragrance of her skin, from holding her in one hand like a violin. She is so light the mattress does not dip.

After that, I change century. I won't remember (everything else, she won't either). It's all still bells, dice, circles of a face in the air.

What I think I know about her, what I can explain, the reasons I chatter on, even my astonishment, what I wish for her and how much I want her to be happy – this is all nothing. Territories grow between us. The woolly blue of her eyes appears. When she stands up, her head has a wobble, a cross-stitch pattern, an oscillation, crossing back and forth over its axis.

For a long while I extend the kingdom, leaning over her, naming all that we encounter: fields, flowers, houses, and the walls of the cemetery. This is how we go about, her lying down, me standing, this is how she knows me. I am the shade thrown, the chatterbox with her sleeves rolled up, a figure cut-out against the seasons.

Our territories overlap; we share a single shadow. We share this thing that is not skin tone. Our sleep intermingles. Nonetheless, inside of me, like an old furnace, the remains of a fire that must not go out are sleeping. I don't know how long I can live this way without throwing off my entire being.

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I rediscover shadows. The shadow of the rocking horse on the curtain; on the path, hoofed beasts with legs as long as hers; of the train: racing over bare ground through thistles; the shadow of eyelashes on a cheek – indescribable: of a smile; and of the sleeping body, this somber outline on the small bed. She holds together two edges of the sheet; they are the two shorelines of forgiveness; she doesn't want nighttime without daytime, she still knows this grace.

Whether twilight or any other hour, it doesn't matter, she sleeps when her eyelids droop, when what we don't know about her unfurls – that which I am happy not to know.

Night falls like a fur coat. Love is so sad when I keep my distance. Sometimes I listen to her cry, like a bell, her coiled sobs. I lose heart, then rally, open the door and muss her hair. I would give my life. I rock her, on and on. When I place her back in bed, all that is possible slips out of my arms. I am not ready for what's coming next, the return to ordinary time.