

# Like water in water

Myriam Wahli

Novel

French



*This story is sensitively portrayed in a light and gentle way despite the seriousness of the themes it touches on: an abusive father, a deserted mother, global warming becoming almost unbearable, and confinement in a village with backward and sinister customs. Marcelle, a perceptive and courageous teenager, nevertheless stays afloat, doing whatever she can, finding pockets of oxygen between the brambles and the metallic sky.*

*"It is only once they have arrived in the long street of around ten houses that they start all over again, the night removing the last traces of day, the light breeze trying and failing to do the same with the heat, the leaves on the poplar trembling, the crows having their dance, the Allondon cracking the valley and you, with the houses behind you, watching it happen."*

## Title

Comme de l'eau dans l'eau

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## Translation rights

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## Author

Myriam Wahli was born in 1989 in Switzerland, in the industrial region of the Bernese Jura. Her writing style is intrinsically linked to her lifestyle: polymorphous, non-linear, close to the senses. Her debut novel, *Venir grand sans virgules* (Getting big without commas), was published by Éditions de l'Aire in 2018. In the summer of 2023, *Ohne Komma*, the German translation of this novel, was published by Verlag die Brotsuppe. *Comme de l'eau dans l'eau* (Like water in water) is her second novel.

Photo: Anja Fonseca

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Excerpt translated by Michelle Bailat-Jones

II

The Dalai Lama has an Instagram account.

You put the screen under her nose because she can't seem to integrate what you've said. The kiosk owner, whom everyone here calls Laduc, stares at you like you've just punched her. She isn't Buddhist, but in her world the Dalai Lama is a superior being, a recluse who lives in the mountains in Nepal and employs telepathic channels to spread his perfect wisdom throughout the world.

Laduc is somewhat your compass and her kiosk, the village HQ. She's there every day. People come to splutter out their worries, spittle hitting behind the counter, and those who don't come in do it through the constantly ringing telephone. Which is because Laduc has the gift, and everyone knows it. Today has been a lost wedding ring, two missing cats, a wart and three burns. Today's been fairly quiet.

You sit together beneath the pinkish sun faded Coca-Cola umbrella at the round table. Thinking on it, it's a miracle we can still get Coke these days. Electricity is rationed, no one can pay for gas, but there's still a way to get yourself 35 grams of sugar from an aluminum can. The doctor has forbidden her any sugary drinks, Your diabetes, come now, be reasonable. Laduc won't answer straight out that she doesn't give a hoot, Laduc doesn't say everything she's thinking. When she tells the story, there's this smile plastered across her face, the smile of a child who's just gotten away with a bit of mischief.

Judging from the dark circles the night has carved out beneath her eyes, the sugar isn't too much. She heard them – the Petets – all the way over here. The Petets is what we all call Berth's dogs because the kennel sits in a place called Les Petets. Paris has its Parisians and The Petets has its Petets. Berth named his kennel *Freedom Run*. What a joke. Poor dogs. Allondon creek, which runs into the Rhône, works like their megaphone, they didn't stop barking all night. The barking echoes from building to building, knocking on every single door, climbing up each window looking for a way inside, for the chance to get in and live a bit longer in a small space. The barking dogs don't stop you from sleeping. As long as you know where Adam is, better yet, if you know he's in his bed and your dad asleep, the dogs don't stop you. Sleep is your break from the world, and you wonder what might happen to you if it was ever taken away.

Your fingers keep scrolling over other people's lives on the screen of your phone and Laduc keeps making up theories as to why the dogs started barking. Serving herself another mint syrup, her suspicions gather around the idea of lupus as the guilty party. This is just Laduc being Laduc. Everyone knows the reason is Berth, the owner. There've been two or three complaints, and the police even came once. They found him taking a little break from his vomit, laid out in the underbrush about ten meters from the kennel's barbed wire fence. It isn't like an illegal party, the police said, the dogs can't be unplugged, and they never came back. Anyway, it's not in anyone's interest to make things difficult for Berth. Every single dog in the region whose middle name is *Headcrusher* ends up here and Berth even gets a little money from the state to take care of them, a way to ensure we don't end up with a pack of wild dogs shitting in the flower beds one after the other.

Berth's face bears the discreet but detectable sign of someone who had goals but never managed to achieve them. He'd once dreamed of building himself a sailboat and navigating the great blue. In the beginning, the kennel meant he had some land to put his workshop on and the money from the dogs helped him cover his costs. Then the dream, which was threatening to dry out, found itself at the bottom of the bottles that Berth would never end up throwing into the sea.

Laduc also knows about Berth, knows that if his dogs are barking it's that he's gotten so drunk he hasn't fed them, but she quite enjoys embellishing our day-to-day by telling stories, Gives us something to do, she says.

The air hangs completely still; every once in a while, Laduc's ash-colored bangs seem to puff up on the illusion of a breeze. Even late in the day, the heat doesn't lessen its hold, not even a bit. The only rain around here is what flows down from the top of your head down your neck, or gathers across your forehead; when the drops get heavy enough, the dam breaks, running over your temples and eyelids.

Maybe it'll make headlines, Laduc breaks into your quiet. That'll take our mind off the weather and the rationing, a nice old-fashioned wolf hunt, what do you say? Since you don't answer, she starts crooning, *Tu as vu comme elle a changé tout d'un coup eh ben ma doudou elle a vu le loup y'avait pas urgence y'avait pas le feu d'autant que la romance a duré bien peu elle a vu le loup deux minutes en tout.*

In your downturned face, you secretly lift your eyes to the sky until, suddenly, her patience runs out, Oh, the magnet's finally disconnected from the screen?

Laduc is ageless. One foot in the past and one here, or half a foot. She's always been here, loyal to the kiosk. Laduc is a solid one, no bigger than anyone else but she stands out for being so upright. Pride? No. More something like dignity. It makes you wonder what the hell she's doing in a kiosk. She's got a square on her shoulders, more salt than pepper and bangs cut hard and straight that make a frame around her face. A reassuring structure, a solid helmet. And within the slightly narrow helmet, every aspect of her face is pointy – gaze, nose, cheekbones. A face in which each feature is an animal on the lookout.

The phone rings and while Laduc gets up, predicting it's another wart needing healing, Adam's silhouette appears at the end of the main road, walking in your direction against the walls.

Along the path that connects the gas station to the kiosk, there's Chez Mimi, the old clothing store and behind the dust-filled window are naked mannequins. If you don't see him coming in time, he stops in front of the window and slides a hand into his pants. Just last week, it happened again, the teacher at the elementary school opened the window and screamed so the entire street could hear, Marcelle! Your brother! There are kids here, this can't happen! You get up and run in his direction. The heat stops you like a gale blowing you down and you're too late, Adam has already started the back and forth, your words aren't enough, your words don't matter. Luckily, it's Wednesday, Wednesday afternoon and school is closed, there's no teacher around who can yell, but the kids on the playground have traded their swings for Adam, he's more interesting, and now they're all flattened up against the fence and singing, Adam's got his hand in his pants, Adam's got his hand in his pants. Tomorrow you'll be on time. You promise yourself.

Laduc told him once the story of his Biblical namesake and since then he's been fixated. Adam, the first man on earth walking around naked and he gets to sleep with the first woman in a garden of paradise. In and of itself, it isn't really an outsized fantasy, nothing about traveling to Mars or a thirty-thousand-dollar cruise to watch the Arctic melt.

Adam is your older brother.

Pulling down the sleeve of his shirt, you wonder if Laduc can do more than just heal burns and find lost wedding rings; maybe the gift can work on other things.

Adam sits down in Laduc's seat – Laduc who is still trying to eradicate some poor wart through the telephone – and stares straight in front of him. Though his face is downturned because of the work his hands couldn't finish earlier, the start of a smile begins to rise. For a short moment, you think you know why until

you see a silhouette moving somewhere in your peripheral vision, the figure then passes in front of you without stopping before turning and disappearing at the end of the main street. Adam's mouth is wide open, and it's clear that the little string of saliva at the corner of his lips isn't because he's about to have his daily ice cream but because of the passing figure. In this hole-of-a-village, the unknown works like an epiphany. To distract him, so he won't decide to follow the ghost, you remind him that it's time for ice cream, calling for Laduc and making it clear through the tone of your voice this is an emergency.

Without exception, it's always pistachio. The aromas pouring out from the Bottle never influence his tastes. Adam never varies anything. The main difference between him and other people is that he never went through the natural developmental step of cutting the proverbial cord. Since our mother took off and he can't connect with her, he's focused on the rest of the world.

He's finished his ice cream from the kiosk but doesn't understand why he shouldn't have another because when there's ice cream and it's good, why not. You make a diversion by saying, come on, let's count the cars and whoever wins gets an ice cream tomorrow. The truth is that Adam is going to get one tomorrow anyway, but the strategy works.

In his universe, the days repeat, life is lived in the present moment, and sometimes you think he could make his fortune in the business of personal development.

While waiting for the thermometer to descend, you go together to stand beneath the bridge, your backs against the column, where there seems to be a tiny sliver of coolness. If his poker game went well, Nic will join you. You and Nic are like peas in a pod, as thick as thieves, and more than anything, you have just about the same future. His smells like weed and closed-up rooms and yours bergamot and patchouli. You remember that Nic was also one of the kids always picked last in gym, though the word "picked" in this context is a bit strong. Sharing this type of thing forges a bond.

Each time a car rolls over your heads, the columns tremble a little. The game is to bet on how many cars will pass in a given amount of time previously decided on, but you skip this step because the game stops by default, as if by magic, when the number of cars matches the number of fingers Adam holds up and shouts, I won!

Results – one hour, three cars. And it's the right score. One, the bus that takes the cross-border workers from The Flask back to their homes, two, potentially a rich person's car, three, the same. Numbers two and three are surely coming from Fat Charles's

house, Nic's dad. He used to be Big Charles but then after all the sitting around all day and with age, big became fat. Fat Charles owns the only gas station for miles.

Ever since Nic started claiming to make more money playing online poker than filling up gas tanks for city people, and that his older sister Claire ran off saying she couldn't live in this fucking hole of a town of inbred losers, Fat Charles has had to do some hiring. You remember that you hadn't dared ask what inbred meant at the time, but Google helped you out soon after.

Fat Charles and his employees take turns from the white plastic chair, pellet gun in their laps and a small Pierrot Lusso sunshade to help them stand the heat. They even set up a cooler. All that's missing is a small pond and the scene would be complete. A bit of fishing in a postmodern rest area.

If you're unlucky enough to be at the kiosk when Nic's dad comes to get more of his cheap L&Ms, you both end up getting an earful about all his customers, with commentary thrown in for free. Because it happens so rarely, Fat Charles remembers each full tank of gas.