

# **Translation Narratives:** **How language shapes identity, community and expression**

**Part One:** *Theoretical introduction examining the use of French as a literary language in Quebec;*

**Part Two:** *Translation of the short story collection To Leave from There by Sylvie Massicotte (English translations paired with stories in original French)*

**Part Three:** *Creative writing project inspired theoretically and thematically by my translation of Massicotte's work*

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General University Honors  
Spring 2010

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Capstone Theoretical Introduction

**Translation Narratives:  
How language shapes identity, community and expression**

Language acts as a slowly evaporating fog in French-Canadian writer Sylvie Massicotte's 2009 short story collection *To Leave from There*. As images of isolation and loneliness progress through the rudiments of narrative, language coaxes bewildering plotlines into sudden focus and calls identity into question. Massicotte's stories all climb to the same frenetic ending: that moment where a character's internal dialogue finds material resonance.

Her characters, as indicated by the collection's title, are caught inexorably in motion; they are the wanderers and lone wolves, hovering on the possibility of a life less lonely. Spare and muscular, Massicotte's language thus becomes a material force carving an emotional landscape. Drawing on the materiality of her language, Massicotte uses objects to give shape and substance to the abstractions in her stories. A brass lamp embodies the regret of a now-unraveling family; nostalgia takes the shape of a pair of designer sunglasses bought in a train station; certainty becomes manifest in a pair of heavy hiking boots leaving thick footprints in the snow. Engaging in a translation project of Massicotte's stories, I worked to preserve the muscular materiality of her language and the ways in which objects bring her characters' emotions to sudden clarity.

Drawing on Massicotte's collection for thematic and theoretic inspiration, I created the same keen sense of collision between internal dialogue and objective reality in my own short story, "My Fugitive Ode." My story follows the relationship between Annabelle and her single mother the day before Annabelle leaves for college across the country. Much as the physical journeys of Massicotte's characters often illuminate a hungry emotional search, my story's

narrative arc follows Annabelle as she anticipates moving from one world to another. Her mom, a guidance counselor who seeks order on the outside but falls apart on the inside, comes to tangibly represent what she'll leave behind. As the story progresses through a series of quotidian, but emotionally powerful scenes, identity gets called into question and Annabelle and her mom must mediate their emotionally-rife world. Similar to Massicotte's work, language, in all its material manifestations, pauses the commotion and initiates fragments of clarity and self-realization.

Compelled by Massicotte's narratives, I worked to similarly give abstract emotional and linguistic qualities material resonance. I turned to Pablo Neruda's odes for guidance and inspiration. His effort to describe the material and the abstract renders each its opposite. His ode to a storm becomes a song about passion and freedom; his ode to reading raises the question of how to live.<sup>i</sup> Most influential, however, his poem "Wine" inspired the driving force of my story. "Perhaps when you leave/you'll take something of mine: chestnuts, roses or a surety of roots and boats/that I wanted to share with you comrade."<sup>ii</sup> Annabelle must come to terms with this osmosis: what she will leave behind and what she will take with her. Objects become the signposts of her emotional journey, her method for measuring her "surety of roots." She must confront the over-articulated materiality of her mother's world to discover her mother's true identity.

My character's lives are accordingly full of objects. The brass lamp from Massicotte's work finds its way into Annabelle's bedroom, a symbol of her parent's marriage before it fell apart. Annabelle's mom obsessively orders useless objects from home shopping networks in the middle of the night; shopping trips for dorm room furniture navigate the fears of both characters. Language in my novella becomes material: these characters communicate through objects.

The material world thus gives the comfort and illusion of order in my personal creative work, masking a more complex and chaotic emotional landscape. As a progression of quotidian scenes suddenly and sharply calls identity into focus, Annabelle must question the artificial materiality of her mother's world. As I used objects to represent language, Annabelle and her mom take comfort in the predictability of their methods for communicating, even as their language forges emotional distance between them.

For example, midway through my story Annabelle and her mom take a trip to Target to help Annabelle organize for college. Surrounded by a store's worth of objects, the mom and daughter poignantly lose each other. Breathless and terrified, Annabelle wanders the Target in search of her mother. Along the way, she gets false relief from other women wandering the store who look like her mom. In a world of objects, Annabelle loses her sure sense of her mother's identity, and accordingly her own sense of direction.

For help using the material world to evoke a character's emotional disorder, I read John Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea*. The order of the material world his narrator depicts contrasts with the narrator's emotional insecurity. "I have to describe exactly how I see this table, this street, these people, my package of tobacco, because that's where the change happens," the main character says to introduce the story.<sup>iii</sup> Living in solitude, Sartre's narrator no longer speaks to anyone: silence and isolation are the qualities of his personal language. Objects and patterns thus become the ways in which he reconvenes with the objective world. Predicting the schedules of the trains arriving and leaving the train station next door, he remarks, "what is there to fear in such a regular world?"<sup>iv</sup>

I tried to use objects to similar effect in my personal creative work, using the organization of the material world to suggest an ironic emotional chaos. Annabelle's mom sorts everything:

she truly lives according to the golden rule of everything in its right place. Her husband's things she insists on keeping after the divorce rest in labeled and taped boxes; she packs her daughter's clothes for college in color-coded Tupperware; each of her students gets his or her own manila folder, their name spelled in Sharpie on its label. And yet, as the story unfolds, the mom falls apart a little bit more each day. The mom tries to organize her material world, but the pieces cannot sort become the fault lines for her emotional unraveling. Thus, her mother's artifice of predictability and order gives Annabelle the illusion that she knows her mother too well. However, this discord between her mother's impulse for order and moments of helplessness embody the insecurity at the heart of the relationship between Annabelle and her mother. Annabelle comes to realize that the only person she truly knows is herself.

I used this contrast between the over-articulated materiality of Annabelle's world and the unspoken disorder of her emotional relationships to mimic the inherent difficulty in translation. Language is its own predictable artifice. Translation, in this light, is a simple math of adapting the patterns of one language into the patterns of another. However, the complex meaning that lurks below the surface of a language poses the greatest challenge for the translator. The pieces that can't be neatly placed into the pattern; the emotional objects that can never be sorted: ushering this meaning from one culture to another is where translation transforms from a science to an art.

In Massicotte's work, objects likewise forge communication and pull characters and relationships into focus. Characters use objects to question the people in their lives they know too well, or feel guilty for not knowing well enough. For example, in the story, "The Blurring of Time," a dad can only interact with his distant daughter once he buys expensive sunglasses at the train station. The sunglasses give impulse for communication at the same time as they preserve

distance between the two characters: the daughter cannot look her dad in the eyes, and this comforts both of them.

The heritage of the Quebecois literary revolution plays out in Massicotte's collection and in my translation and writing projects. As the Quebecois literary world sought a distinct voice and identity, language became the material manifestation of a deeper cultural insecurity. The Joul dialect gave Quebecois a local literary voice, but also isolated creative efforts from the literary world at large. Language thus pulled concerns about Quebecois identity into focus.

Language works to similar effect in "My Fugitive Ode" by becoming a marker for emotional transformation. Much as Quebecois writers alternated between the local language of Joul and the universal French language, Annabelle struggles to find a voice that will preserve her familial relationships, while letting her communicate in her intellectual, independent future. Inspired by the terse and compelling language of Massicotte's characters, I used the material world to help my characters find new avenues for communication. Material objects collide with notions of leaving to give substance and shape to an emotional landscape.

Annabelle searches hungrily for resonant self-expression in the objects that surround her: lime-green plastic organizers bought with coupons; eight-pound vacuum cleaners and dirty cereal bowls; a brass lamp she turns on in the middle of the night when she cannot sleep. These objects in turn prompt her moments of self-realization. Surrounded by objects that represent betrayal and confusion, she recognizes the ambivalence in her "surety of roots." In order to carry herself into a new world and find her own identity along the way, she must give up some of the stuff that traps her in the local language of home. And so, with trembling hands she opens a trash bag.

As a writer, I had the distinct advantage of translating the stories I used as models, and, in doing so, was able to attend to the movement of Massicotte's language and her emotionally-powerful imagery. All of the stories in *To Leave From There* have a compelling immediacy. Likewise, Massicotte's description and characterization is sparse. She doesn't beleaguer her muscular plot with extensive back story or character description. Rather, how her characters communicate – both with themselves and others – evokes their specific personalities. When the main character in the story, "Because that's how it is," pleads her brother, "Please, let's just empty the apartment. That's what we're here to do it," a whole childhood of exasperation comes to the story's surface.

Accurately translating the collection's dialogue became my central pre-occupation. Dialogue gives structure and resonance to Massicotte's characters and relationships; it imbues her stories with a sharp sense of place. More than rendering accurate dialogue in my translations, I also wanted to be sure that I hit the right tone. Her characters' voices are the main way readers engage with their personalities and conflicts; I wanted to make sure that the characters spoke with their sensibilities, and not my own.

Images also play an important narrative and thematic role in *To Leave From There*. Beautiful, careful descriptions of objects evoke the emotional worlds of her characters. From golf balls rattling on the windowsill of a dead father's house to a watch with a scratched lens, Massicotte attentively draws each object with which her characters interact. Objects evoke emotions and the complex transformations of relationships, but they also serve to give her character's worlds a specific sense of place. Images root the reader: as the stories progress and identity gets called into question, the reader must confront her false sense of bearings. The reader must make sense of the images she believed to be true. I made my descriptions as clear

and specific as possible in English so that Massicotte's images would unfold with the same crispness and emotional immediacy in translation. In working to preserve the incredible detail of Massicotte's dialogue and imagery, I imbued my own creative work with the same attention to imagery and communication.

Massicotte engages in a dialogue with a French-Canadian literary heritage shaped by the political force of language. Language is intrinsic to Quebec's search for political and literary identity. Quebec wrestled with the aesthetic (and notably linguistic) influence of Paris and New York as it sought its, "Canadian soul," its distinct literary voice. French-Canadian intellectuals fumbled to define the quality and possibility of a national literature, weighing, on the one hand, the refinement of French and mastery of language as possible measures and, on the other, the Quebecois writer's ability to integrate his own language and themes.<sup>v</sup>

It became clear that Quebec needed its own language, especially as the Tranquil Revolution's cries for political and linguistic independence seized the province in the 1960s and 70s. Critics questioned the possibility of forging a national literature while still serving, "the language and cultural aesthetics borrowed from France."<sup>vi</sup> The French-Canadian dialect of Joul served that role during the 1960s and 70s, creating a distinct voice that helped emancipate the Quebecois writer.

The use of Joul for the emancipation of Quebecois literature made many French-Canadian writers uneasy. The majority of Quebecois outright hated its usage, even as it became the standard code for French-Canada's youth. Quite simply, writing in dialect seemed anathema to being taken seriously in the cosmopolitan literary world. Case in point, between 1960 and 1970 there were more than 2,523 articles written about Joul, 90% of which were against its usage.<sup>vii</sup> Writers were unsure if the use of Joul forged a French-Canadian voice or if it



condemned the Province's body of literature to regionalism. "How to achieve an authentic voice without condemning ourselves to regionalism, without our texts becoming unreadable outside of France?"<sup>viii</sup>

Several prominent writers, however, passionately championed Joul as the only way to write truthfully. French-Canadian poet Fernand-Ouellette wrote that French will inexorably be for him a foreign language, and furthermore, that writing in French condemns him to the status of "barbarian." "My mother language isn't French," he said "but Franglais."<sup>ix</sup> Even further, novelist and playwright Michel Tremblay wrote his groundbreaking play "Belles Soeurs" alternating between Joul and beautiful French poetics.<sup>x</sup> Indeed, the play's preoccupation isn't so much the lives of its characters, but the contrast between these two languages, between the two "beautiful sisters" of French and Joul.

Within the French-Canadian literary world, language is thus material, the tangible manifestation of a more abstract debate about political and cultural identity. This materialization of language became my inspiration as I embarked on translating Massicotte's collection and writing my own creative work. Massicotte's short stories braid this literary heritage into the worlds her characters inhabit. Using material objects to evoke entire emotional landscapes, language comes to embody an individual isolation.

As in the story, "The True from the False," language forges distance between loved ones. "There are elements of truth and falsehood in words," the main character's ex-girlfriend admits. Language, like objects, measures our uncertainty of roots. Much as French-Canadian writers debated language to give shape to a Quebecois literary identity, language comes into question when Massicotte's characters are no longer certain about their place in the world. As

Massicotte's and my own characters come to realize, language must be called into question and examined to understand our own identities.

Ali Goldstein  
Capstone Translation One  
Written in the original French by: Sylvie Massicotte  
From the collection *To Leave from There*

**Because that's how it is**

“After my mother's death, it wasn't the ashes we dispersed but all of the objects in her house.”  
-Suzanne Jacob, *Histoires de s'entendre*

I have to successfully empty the apartment with him. I have to do it. It's written that I have to do it. One of our parent's last wishes. And now here I am, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with my older, red-headed brother. At least he's no longer graying; he was starting to show grey some years back. I haven't seen him since he got out of prison. It's been how long already? In any case, he brought cookies. I said no thanks, but he insisted. He's like our mom that way: he insists.

I passed by her house on my way here. She begged me to do it, and it's rare that she chooses me to fulfill her wishes. I would've been touched too if she hadn't still insisted, lowering her voice to a murmur, “You know the lantern, the Spanish lantern, your father's, we bought it together in Ronda, I pointed to the lantern and said *El Atril, por favor*. The lantern, yes, I would like to see it again...”

I should cut her off to explain that I don't know if I can, that it will depend on her son, when all of a sudden she insisted, “Your brother, he won't want it!”

How can she be so sure?

“I'm convinced of it,” she assured me.

And then she repeated that she wanted this lantern more than anything. It was the lantern dad used when he played the guitar. Of course, the will didn't make particular mention of this

object, so that if we had to do something with it, it might as well go to her, right? It was rightly hers since she bought it with our father in Spain, and because she'd been the one to say, *El atril, por favor*, and because he'd left nothing for her in his will. "Your father probably forgot about the lantern. He was so sick after all..."

Damned lantern. My brother threw his jacket on the windowsill as he entered the house. The jacket stayed put as though clinging to a coat hook. Then, he took out his cursed peanut-butter cookies. And now, he insists, playing the part of our mother. "Just take one of them," he says, nearly angry. He adds, "You're being crazy. Dad is dead, and that's all there is to it. You need to eat a little. And it's *peanut* butter! It's nutritious. Just try one! It's a cookie, not the end of the world."

He pushes a cookie in my face, holding it between his dirty fingers. He pretends the biscuit's a plane and throws it at me, but I lower my head to guard my open mouth. He continues to insist. I am scared like a little girl. I start to worry that he'll ask why I resist the cookies when they've been my favorites since I was little. Dad gave them to me with such affection when he sat me on his knees.

I try to explain to him that I don't eat peanut butter cookies anymore because Sebastian is allergic so I try not to buy them. And besides, I don't crave them anymore. I don't crave them anymore, I repeat. Furious, he interrupts me, "I don't believe you!"

I gather all of my courage. "Why can't I move on? I'm not like you. You can talk about your stupid memories after your little misadventures in the north. Yeah, I said it, your stupid adventures in the north."

"Because that's how it is," he says, pulling the fight to a halt.

That's how we stop fights in my family: because that's how it is.

“Because that’s how it is, there I said it. I’m not going to take anything important, you’ll see. And after that, I’m gone,” he declares.

I picture the lantern. Not the lantern that mom asked for!

“Just the guitar and the camping gear. You can do what you will with everything else,” he continues.

I’m relieved that he doesn’t pick up the lantern, but I can’t help myself from adding, “You’re just going to pawn off dad’s guitar to your salesman friends, aren’t you?”

He shrugs his shoulders, swallows a cookie with a single gulp. I watch him chew the peanut butter pastry, and the smell hits me.

I sigh. “I can’t do this anymore.”

He has to prod, his temper starting to show. A peanut butter cookie crumb clings to his lip. “You can’t do what, exactly?”

Him, the peanut butter cookies, me on his knees...I didn’t have the stomach for any of it.

Lined up neatly on the windowsill, dad’s golf ball collection begins to shake.

In my trembling voice, I stammer. “Please, let’s just empty the apartment. That’s what we’re here to do.”

I try to calm him down. “Maybe you want his golf balls?” I suggest.

He grabs his jacket, sliding his muscled arms into its sleeves, and then picks up our dad’s guitar. Without a word, he also grabs the lantern. I want to say something to get it back, but I can’t find the words. Before slamming the door, he turns to face me.

“The lantern is for mom,” he says. “She asked me to get it for her.”

And I devour the package of peanut butter cookies in a single sitting until my stomach hurts.

Ali Goldstein  
Translation Capstone  
Translation 2  
From the collection *To Leave from There* by Sylvie Massicotte

### **The Blurring of Time**

He wanders around for who knows how long, what with the scratched case and blemished hands of his useless watch. The hour is blurry. Time is a blur, he tells himself as a passing car splashes a puddle onto his pants leg. Through the steamed-up lenses of his eyeglasses, he examines the size of the stain. He's struck by the perfume of salty-sea air as he gets back on the sidewalk. He has a hunch that the melted snow smells of salt. He closes his eyes for a second and imagines himself walking next to the ocean.

It's been such a long time since he's walked the palm tree-lined streets of a balmy beach town and smelled the sea air. And now all he can remember is how much he loved watching his daughter run across the beach in her little, flower-printed dresses.

Lost in his memories, he bumps into someone's shoulder. By the time he forms the words, "excuse me," the person is no longer at his side. He realizes he's the only person with his umbrella still open above his head. As he fumbles to close it, one of its ribs gets stuck on a teenager's backpack. The rib twists free, and the teenage girl shoots him a furtive glance before continuing on her way. People are running every which way: it's the hour for running he notices, even if he can't distinguish the numbers on his watch through its scratched case and the fog of his eyeglasses.

At the red light, he pulls a little screen from his pocket and sees he's received a new message. *Where are you*, he strains to read on the screen as he peers above his glasses. The light flashes to green, and he slides the phone into his front pocket and crosses the street. It's as

though the earth lifts up the stream of people and carries it to the train station or its other destinations. The building is suddenly right in front of him. He leaves the crowd to join a handful of other people, all in a hurry. Entering the train station, he stops at the first boutique to buy chocolate candies. Several brightly-colored chocolates land in his pocket. *Where are you?*, now joined by chocolate candies.

He leaves the store, pausing for a moment with his back to its display window. As he reads a poster hanging on the opposite wall, raindrops drip from the broken joints of his wrecked umbrella: *the joy of being you*. He leaves his umbrella resting against the store's window and moves into the train station's dark hallways.

With the intention of consulting the timetable of arrivals, he posts himself instead in front of the timetable of departures. He takes off his glasses and his already sweaty scarf, using the scarf to scrub one eyeglass lens and then the other. He blows on the lenses, scrubbing again, and then puts them back on. He reads the list of cities. He has no desire to visit any of them. He wonders why people always want to uproot themselves from one place to another. Especially on Fridays. Especially when it's humid and everywhere the sky smells so much like the salty sea air.

He looks around him. Yet again, he catches a glimpse of this advertisement, *the joy of being you*. Then, he sights the timetable of arrivals. Nearing the schedule, he pulls the screen from his pocket. *Where are you?* He is there, always there, at the top of the escalator. He starts to walk but there is so much space to cover. With long strides, he traverses the train station. He stops every once in awhile to crane his neck and gaze up at the infinitely-high ceiling. He feels the scratch of a sneeze and is certain he's getting sick. The noise created by a simple sneeze

echoing throughout the waiting area surprises him. The travelers seem to consult one another before turning their heads toward him in perfect unison to stare. He searches his pockets.

Chocolates, but no tissues. Too bad. Sniffing, he continues to wander until he spots a display of tinted eyeglasses nearby. He grabs a pair and tries them on just to kill time, just for amusing himself, for checking out his reflection in the mirror above the display case. What would he look like wearing these in a pretty little town somewhere in the south?

He sighs, and the white price tag dangling from the frames catches the drop of snot a tissue would've sponged up, if he'd had one. He tries to dry off the tag with his scarf.

"Can I help you, sir?"

How was this woman wearing a summer dress with all this unhealthy air conditioning?

"You're not cold?"

She throws her head back and laughs. Her neck is less-bronzed than her face.

"I have a hunch you're leaving for sunny weather!" she shouts, gesturing to the tinted glasses he already holds in his scarf.

"They'd suit you well, you know...Do you want to try them on?"

Timidly, he returns the sunglasses to the display case and looks in the mirror. His forehead, his eyebrows, his eyes, his cheeks, his mouth, his chest...He's anxious to put the sunglasses back on: he'd grown accustomed to having them on his face. The saleswoman turns her back to him as though she's decided his reflection isn't as interesting as she'd originally thought. But just as he's about to leave, the saleswoman turns her head and approaches him.

"You should try them on. Just to see how they look."

He hesitates, examining the speckled-metal of the expensive frames.

"Do you have a tissue?" he asks.



“Even better,” she responds, presenting him with an eyeglass cleaning cloth. “It comes free with any eyeglass purchase.”

He doesn’t attempt to clarify the situation, only hoping that his nose will stop running. He puts the sunglasses on again and contemplates his reflection. It’s him, but not exactly. His lips stretch into a smile. The saleswoman inches closer.

“There!” she bursts, adjusting the frames to sit higher. Opening the tag that graces his nose, she continues, “They suit you well, don’t you think?”

He looks at himself. It’s his mysterious air he notices first in the mirror. He doesn’t completely recognize himself, but this pleases him.

The saleswoman drives home the sale. “They’re sold. And not too pricey for Alfonso Scallici.” He turns over the price tag and reads its back. Too much for sunglasses, Scallici or not. These sunglasses in the dark train station on an overcast day: he is nonetheless delighted. He hands over his credit card and scrubs his sunglasses with the cleaning cloth as the saleswoman rings up the purchase. He tries on the sunglasses again; he is insatiable, in bliss.

A breathless voice behind his shoulder makes him jump.

“Well, here you are!” his daughter chides him.

“Here I am,” he agrees, leaning in to kiss her on the cheek.

She whistles. “Alfonso Scallici? Are you serious?”

She sets her luggage on the ground and his little packages on the counter. In a tender gesture, he takes her hand and opens it; he rests a chocolate on her palm and then encloses her beautiful fingers one by one around it.

As she smiles, she unwraps the chocolate’s delicate packaging and slides it between her flushed lips. He starts to scrub the case of his watch with his new cleaning cloth. The

saleswoman hands him a Bic pen, and he signs the receipt as he watches his daughter's cheek swell where she's lodged the chocolate.

"There, it's all yours," his daughter mumbles. She nudges one of the little packages toward him. He notices the palm trees on its packaging, and he wonders if she too smelled the sea in the air. And he reads the inscription on the package: for you, because you are you.

The saleswoman slips away. He pulls his daughter towards him, finding again a simple happiness. He listens to her chew the chocolate. In pulling her closer, he sees the case of his watch now sparkling more than ever. And the numbers have never been so clear.

As he slowly lets go of his daughter, he holds her by the shoulders to steal a closer look at her. But he manages. He manages not to ask her for how long she'll be around.

Before gathering his bags and taking away the gift he has yet to unwrap, he unclasps the bracelet of his watch and lets it disappear inside his pocket.

His daughter in his arms, Alfonso Scallici sunglasses on his nose, he will exit the train station and return to the overcast day. With her. In the blur of time.

Ali Goldstein  
Translation Capstone  
Translation 3  
From the collection *To Leave from There* by Sylvie Massicotte

### **The True from the False**

*Leaving* is such a short word...A simple word. A suitcase banging down the moving walkway at the airport.

His hiking boots leave footprints in the dirty snow. He lifts his bag so that it won't get wet and muddy in the snow. He grabs hold of it by the straps, pulling it close and lowering his gaze so that the bag won't slide out of his hands...there... "To get away from there." That's what he wrote in his message: "I have to get away from there."

Maya, who has known him all these years, reads it over again and again. "I have to get away from there." Why didn't he write: "from here?" She should read, "I have to get away from here." And not from "there." She tells herself that it's already beside the point. Maya enjoys analyzing words. Those of others, of course. The meaning of her own words constantly eludes her.

He advances solidly in the snow. Solid, that's the word for the large footprints left by the soles of his boots so thick they peel off even before wearing-out. He advances with certainty, despite no longer being certain that he will return to Maya and pick up the life they had before. A life together. He wants something different: a life. Less togetherness.

Maya and him. Just words. He knows how to play with the meaning of words so that he sees them as he wants to, believing, despite the evidence, that he acts best and most truthfully. As though the truth was always hidden, buried below the surface of things.

He walks with his gaze straight ahead, scrutinizing the colorless sky that promises him nothing. He prefers the feeling of the horizon over all the other words in the world. He keeps walking as Maya asks herself if his message truly promises that he'll come back. She doesn't count on it. Because there are elements of truth and falsehood in words. She prefers to not know and, for once, not unravel the true from the false.

*Leaving* is a hard word to make sense of. Like trying to seize the sky or understand the sound of a slamming door. The silence that follows.

Ali Goldstein  
*Honors Capstone: Translation Narratives*  
Creative writing fiction project

### **My Fugitive Ode**

*“You didn’t come into this house so I might tear off/a piece of your life. Perhaps when you leave/you’ll take something of mine: chestnuts, roses or/a surety of roots or boats/that I wanted to share with you, comrade.” –“Wine,” Pablo Neruda*

He left one afternoon in a hunter-green mini-van bought from his cousin Franklin for a thousand bucks. He took the dog with him.

Roxanne, the poodle who’d sneezed in my lap when we first brought her home in a different van and a different time, my parents holding hands in the front seat. She limped as my dad dragged her across the front walk until he sighed, stooping to pick her up and cradle her in his arms. She barked and barked, scratching at his wrist and chest to be let down.

My mom gasped and reached to squeeze my hand as we watched him back out of the driveway through the kitchen window.

She squeezed harder. “Promise me you’ll never leave me,” she whispered.

Roxanne pressed her paws against the passenger window as though at any minute she might just jump out.

And then he returned four years later with hair implants where he’d once had a widow’s peak, Roxanne clipped to a blue leash. I opened the door.

“I’m moving into a condo,” he’d said on the phone, my mom crying silently. I’d stared at the pewter-grey sky pushing against the kitchen window, picturing his face. “They don’t allow pets.”

Roxanne sniffed my ankle as he brushed his fingers through the brillo pad of his hair. Picking her up and feeling her familiar warmth, I realized that the house had never stopped smelling like her.

\* \* \*

In the morning, we went to Curves.

It was located in a strip mall down the road, sandwiched between a video rental store and a bakery. The exercise machines always smelled like women's perfume laced with disinfectant, lilacs swimming in bleach.

My mom was a high school guidance counselor who got the summers off, and this summer she was going to get in shape.

"Everything that goes into my mouth is going to be reduced-fat this summer," she'd say as we walked into the gym. She wore her Birkenstock clogs so that her white Reeboks wouldn't get scuffed in the parking lot.

"What about fruits and vegetables?" I asked.

She swung her tennis shoes back and forth, one tied to each wrist by their laces. "We'll see."

The owner was a compact retired therapist with grey weaving through her bright red hair. She seemed to always be in the middle of doing something.

"I'm glad the Green sisters are back," she said as she sponged down the bicep machine. The weights glistened.

My mom laughed, the lines around her lips flexing at the mention of her husband's last-name.

"Oh, Susan," my mom said, freeing the tennis shoes from her wrists. "You are too much."

There were usually a handful of middle-aged women already exercising on the machines arranged in a circle. Every minute you were supposed to switch, and the transition to the next machine was always a spectacle: lots of sighing and pulling up the waists of stretch pants and dropping five-pound weights in an exhausted heap on the floor. Putting on the show of exercising, just in case someone they knew happened to walk across the parking lot to rent a video: *I didn't know John's mom worked-out.*

I jogged in place as my mom eased padded weights in and out with her thigh muscles. Sometimes, I'd spend an extra minute at the improvisational cardio station pretending to cross-country ski in place.

"Anna's the wispy one," my mom shouted to the other women between puffs of air. "She takes after my ex-husband that way. That man was a reed." The other women would nod empathetic nods: damn the lanky men!

Who were these women who worked out in a circle, day-in, day-out?

"She's going off to college soon and leaving me all alone."

"Where?" they chorused.

"Oh, you know, one of those out-east schools," she said. "Anna's a brainy one. She wants to be a translator."

When "Total Eclipse of the Heart" came on, I started doing push-ups on my knees. My mom lay down on her back for crunches, counting out-loud, for everyone's benefit: one

Mississippi, two Mississippi, three. She could do fifteen, before kicking her legs out in front of her and reaching her arms over her head.

“Do you know this is a yoga pose,” she said, staring at the gym’s tapioca ceiling as she caught her breath. “It’s called the corpse.”

Afterwards, we stopped at the bakery next door for warm chocolate croissants. She turned on the air conditioning in the car and we sat eating in silence.

“Dad would’ve cried about these crumbs in the car,” I said. My mom nodded, brushing the golden flakes off her lap and into the cup holder. We were shedding our butter-scented skins.

“Good workout,” she said, turning on the ignition and squeezing a jet of water on the bug-smeared windshield.

“Worked up a sweat,” I said.

“Shit,” she said with a gasp, glancing down at her feet. “I forgot to take my Reebok’s off.”

We’d reached the part of the summer where she started sleeping on the couch with Roxanne across her knees. She fell asleep with the television on, the Home Shopping Network blasting. She liked to buy things in the middle of the night when she thought no one was watching: eight-pound vacuum cleaners, cashmere-blend sweater sets, silver-cuff bracelets. Slipping downstairs for a glass of water before bed, I tip-toed into the living room to mute the television and kiss Roxanne once on the crown of white hair that sprouted from her forehead.

She’d be up and sitting at the kitchen counter when I meandered downstairs for breakfast, her fleece blankets folded neatly at the foot of the couch. As I made coffee and Roxanne whined



to be let out, we'd pretend, either that she still slept in their old bedroom or that sleeping on the couch was something normal moms did: I was never quite sure of the part I was playing.

"Alright, Roxanne," she said at last. She stacked her cereal bowl next to the sink atop the bowl she'd left last night, nesting them like Chinese dolls. I winced, scattering coffee crumbs across the linoleum counter top. She whistled, crouching to clip Roxanne into her Kelly green leash. "Let's go, sweetie pie."

That morning I'd woken up to my mom standing hunched in my bedroom closet, her face the shade of Xerox paper.

"Bella," she said, hearing me turn in bed. "We have so much to do." She wrapped all my red pieces of clothing around her forearm, and then slid out of the closet. I groped for the butterfly-wing handle of my antique reading lamp, illuminating a series of boxes she'd arranged along one wall of my room: Fall, Sweaters, Pastels, Spring Dresses. She hovered for a moment, glancing into each box, before shooting me a nervous, nearly desperate glance.

"Fall," I whispered, and she nestled the red turtlenecks and sweaters neatly in the box. She brushed her hands together and then rested them on her hips.

"After Curves, we're going to Target," she said. She turned to admire the boxes, blushing. "We have to get you organized before you leave tomorrow."

"I'd planned on just taking a suitcase," I said, pulling myself up to my forearms. She'd already disappeared out into the hallway.

By the time I'd washed my face and brushed my teeth, she was already waiting for me at the kitchen table, clogs dangling off her feet. As she drank a can of diet coke, she thumbed through the Life section of the morning newspaper. I noticed that she'd written a list.

"I did some research on storage space," she said, nudging toward me a pile of black and white photos of the dorms at Middlebury.

"You figured out how to use the printer." I picked the top photo off the stack and squinted. She folded and stacked the newspaper in front of her and then turned to me, beaming.

Now, she wrangled a cart as I fetched fountain sodas from the Target Snack Shop. She took a sip of her diet coke, grinning.

"I'm thinking pinks and greens," she said. "Some brown." She set her soda in the shopping cart cup holder as I pushed. We walked slowly so she could re-read the weekly circular: she'd already circled organizational systems on sale that week.

"Middlebury is a pretty liberal place," I said. "I don't want to be that weird color-coordinated girl."

She picked up a lime green laundry hamper off the aisle end cap and chucked it into the cart. "We'll see." She squeezed my shoulder and smiled. She was sorting her students this summer; each had a file folder with his or her name spelled in all caps across its tab. I had become one of her students.

Her hand lingered on my shoulder as we meandered to House and Home. I kept trying to shrug it off and walk ahead, but I was careful not to hurt her feelings. We stopped in front of an aisle teeming with brightly-colored bins of all sizes: they gleamed like honors students. Breathing in, she rested her index finger over her lips. She turned to watch me, and then turned back to the plastic. She sighed again.

“Bella,” she said.

“Pink, I guess.”

“Annabella,”

“But lime green could be cool too.” She rested her hand on an enormous green tub as though deciding whether it was ripe enough to eat. What did you put in an enormous green tub? Her fingers wandered slowly down its side.

“We’ve decided,” she said. “We’ve decided.” I rested my hand on her shoulder.

“He’s going to drive you to Middlebury.”

I gulped. “But you wanted to make my bed.”

She stared at the butter-yellow tile floor, fiddling with a display of plastic shoe organizers. Everything, it appeared, was plastic, disposable.

“Mom.”

She waved her hand in front of her face. “He has the Jeep.”

I pulled her in for a hug, and she shuddered on my shoulder. After a moment, she let go, standing up and tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

“I’m going to look at electronics for a camera,” she said. “Do you want to browse clothes?” I watched her. I wasn’t nearly as convinced as she was that the moment had passed.

“We’ll meet at the register in twenty,” she continued, grabbing hold of the shopping cart with both hands and shepherding the mountain of green plastic to electronics.

Wandering through the racks of clothes, I tried to picture what college Annabelle would wear. I listlessly slung pieces of clothing around my arm. Time was short, so instead of trying them on, I held each piece up to my body in the sections’ floor length mirror. Dark skinny jeans,

magenta cardigans, lace-ribbed camisoles: none of it seemed right. I stared into the mirror and smoothed my cowlick with my fingers. I left all the clothing in a heap next to the display of running shorts. On my way out, I slid a floral print dress off the rack so that I'd have something to show my mom.

“Hippie chic,” she might say, pursing her lips and nodding seriously.

Or, she might shake her head, suddenly concerned. “Too flimsy.”

I let the dress dangle with its hanger crooked around my index finger. We were supposed to meet at the registers, but when I arrived she wasn't there. I kept walking to the back of the store, hoping we'd criss-cross paths along the way. But when I reached the electronics section, I still hadn't found her. I threw the dress over my shoulder and poked my head down every aisle. I had lost my mom. All the women I passed looked vaguely like her – same short haircut and cotton trousers – and I'd blink, relieved, *mom*. They all turned and smiled, uncertain why I was staring.

I started to walk faster, certain that we'd somehow missed each other. I knew she was wandering the parking lot searching for me. I swung my arms vigorously.

Breathless, I stood near the registers and searched. I had lost my mom. Turning to re-trace my way to the back of the store, I spotted her in the café. She had a personal pan pizza in front of her, and she held a slice frozen near her mouth as she stared into the distance.

“Mom,” I said, sliding across from her in the booth. “I thought we were supposed to meet at the registers.”

She took a bite and set the slice down on her plate. “I finished early so I thought I'd get a little snack.” She dabbed grease off the pizza with her napkin. “Just something little.”

“I thought I lost you.” My right hand trembled in my pocket.

“Did you find something?” I rested my free hand on the table and tucked my face in the cup of my hand. My mom blinked, and I noticed that her eyes were red before I looked quickly away. She reached across the table and wrestled my hand free from beneath my chin so she could squeeze it. Her fingers were ice.

“I thought I lost you,” I repeated. I watched her unwind her fingers from my own one at a time.

“You must be starving.” She picked a whisker of cheese off her pizza slice and rested it on her plate.

I unrolled the dress across the seat next to me and stood up. “I’m going to wait in the car.” She swept grease off her lips with a napkin, and I sprinted out the store.

Staring at the endless horizon of the asphalt parking lot, I felt my phone vibrate. I pulled it out of my pocket and stared at its screen. It was my dad. I turned it to silent and slid it back into my pocket.

She came out of the store twenty-minutes later with a giant bag of plastic furniture slung over her right shoulder and a bag of hangers and Lean Cuisines in her left hand.

“I forgot to give you the keys,” she said, spotting me squatting on the Jeep’s back latch as she wheeled closer. “Hope you aren’t mad at me.”

She’d put all of his things into a box she didn’t know what to do with. An old reading lamp, engraved in Spanish at its base, *to the newlyweds*; his Vietnam war protest tee-shirt; a brochure from the hot dog stand he’d worked at to put himself through law school: all of it went

into a box with *his* scrawled in black sharpie just above its taped-up seam, package tape stitching up the wounds for now.

“The neighbors don’t need to watch,” she’d said, closing the wooden blinds with a flick of her wrist and curling up into a ball on the couch for three days.

She’d tried to gather Roxanne’s things too, but then her hands started to tremble when she reached for the old dog bed by the window. The bed stayed until he showed up at our doorstep, a 1997 Sebring convertible parked in the driveway.

Home, we left the bags in the car and ate cherry popsicles on the porch. Afternoon faded to dusk, and Roxanne sat at my mom’s feet licking up drops of melting Popsicle.

“My baby’s going to college in the morning,” she said. Her fingers hung over the edge of her chair and traipsed through Roxanne’s hair. I turned to look at her. I couldn’t help but imagine her outside this frame, her alone, the house silent save for the sound of her footsteps muffled in the beige carpet. I was too old to entertain fantasies of them getting back together, but I couldn’t help but hope he’d stop by every once in awhile with take-out from Applebees just to see how she was doing.

“I have packing to do,” I said at last, and she looked up at me with red eyes.

“Be a doll and throw this away inside for me?” She placed her stained Popsicle stick in my palm, and I nodded.

I hid in my bedroom closet to call him back. Lying on my back the closet’s fluorescent lighting made my bent knees look like scoops of mashed potatoes. He always picked up the phone after one ring.

“Bella,” he said. “Bella, I called you earlier.”

“It’s good to hear your voice.”

We made plans for the morning, and he asked if I needed any help.

“No mom’s got me covered.” I look up at my closet’s clothing rack where only a pair of ill-fitting khaki shorts still hung. He cleared his throat, and I crossed my right knee over my left.

“Bella, could you do me a favor?”

I shook my head no, but he continued.

“I’ve been looking for my old golf sweater, and I can’t find it anywhere.”

“I can look around,” I said.

“It’s yellow. I bought it at the Club.”

I breathed in, bracing myself.

He cleared his throat again. “And how is she?” As though he’d almost forgotten. As though he didn’t like the idea of some of his things still mixed-up with hers.

“Fine, fine.” I just really wanted to get off the phone. She’d be up in a minute with her hand on her hip.

“See you in the morning,” he said after a long pause, and we hung up, at last.

After, I opened my mom’s bedroom door and closed it softly behind me. Her room was always so quiet. The curtains were drawn and the bed neatly made; a framed photo of the three of us in Sarasota still hung over the master bed. Since he left, the room had always felt like a museum.

I could hear the television on downstairs, so I started searching through her closet. Her clothes were color-coordinated, organized from lightest to darkest, and so I dug straight into the yellow section. A souvenir sweatshirt and a sundress, but no golf sweater. I could not even remember him in a yellow golf sweater, but apparently it was his favorite.

Opening her drawers, it dawned on me that I had never seen my mom in most of her clothes. She had drawers full of sweaters she'd never worn. A beautiful, v-neck cashmere sweater still wore its paper tag. I unfolded it and held it up to my face in the mirror. I placed it back in the drawer.

Each drawer was better organized than the last. When I opened her sock drawer, each sock was wrapped neatly with its partner. I groped through the pile of socks. At the bottom of the drawer, my hand brushed up against a sheet of paper. I strained to make sure I could still hear the television on downstairs, and then I picked it up.

It was the perfect loops of her cursive handwriting on thick, cream-colored stationary. It smelled like her lavender drawer liners.

*Dear Peter,* it read. My hand started to shake. *All I can do is keep saying I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please come home soon. Bella needs you. Love, Rebecca.*

I set the letter in my lap and turned to look out the window, but remembered that the curtains were closed. Without letting go of the letter, I opened the window just to get some outside noise. The street outside was so silent.

I read it two more times, and then I folded it down the middle, again and again, until it was a tiny square I shoved into my pocket. I walked back into her closet and stole a pair of her clogs and the cashmere sweater. All along I had been trying so hard to hate him.

Back in my room, I threw the clogs and the sweater into the box marked ETC. Grabbing clothes from the boxes, I threw five tee-shirts, underwear, jeans and a sweatshirt into a suitcase. Then, I locked my bedroom door and found a roll of trash bags she'd left on my counter for cleaning.



Grabbing hold of the first box, I started to cry. I just wanted to throw all of it away. It was a deep, guttural sob, as though I was choking: I chucked the contents of the box into the trash bag. The tears started to come down faster, and I knew now I could not stop. With shaking hands, I threw the second box into the trash bag, and then the third. Before throwing out the contents of the box marked ETC., I grabbed my mom's sweater and clogs and set them in the box in my closet, the box marked *His*, nestling the clogs right next to the Vietnam War protest tee-shirt. Once I'd thrown everything away and ripped apart the boxes, I melted onto the carpet. I breathed in and out into the pillow of my hands, smelling the cherry Popsicle on my panicked breath.

A trash bag slung over each shoulder, I slipped downstairs. I set the bags by the garage door and then stood in the kitchen, watching my mom on the couch. As I turned, I caught a glimpse of my face in the window above the sink. You couldn't even tell I'd been crying. My skin glowed.

"I'm going to take Roxanne out," I said.

"Thanks, Bella." I crouched next to the dog bed to clip the poodle to her leash. "How's the packing going? I couldn't look her in the eye this close. She eased up to a seated position and nodded with a smile

Roxanne followed me out of the living room at my ankles, stopping to stretch her back as I grabbed both trash bags with my left hand. The garage door closed with a click behind me.

Tomorrow morning was trash day, so I threw the bags atop the garbage can and rolled it to the curb. The night smelled earthy, nearly ripe, a fresh delivery of woodchips left outside in the sun. Roxanne peed on the mailbox as I stared at the trash canister. Tomorrow morning all my shorts and dresses and etc. would be picked up and carried away, and then so would I.

Roxanne meandered down the front walk smelling different patches of grass, and I followed behind. As I looked down the street at the mosaic of windows lit up in the night, the poodle lumbered back toward me and sniffed my ankle.

I crouched down and unclipped her from her lead. She watched me.

“Go,” I whispered. “You’re free.”

She blinked. She brushed her forehead against my ankle again and whined.

“You’re a free dog!” I shouted. I looked up the street. “Please go.” She stood at my feet. At last I sighed, scooping her back up. She nestled her head into the crook of my elbow, and I carried her inside.

She turned down the television when I walked back inside. I released Roxanne from her leash, and she turned to stare at me, brown eyes wide, before limping to her water bowl. My mom sat up on the couch, but I opened the refrigerator to grab a can of Diet Coke.

“How’s the packing going?” She came into the kitchen and leaned against the white kitchen counter, watching me. I shrugged, taking a long sip of soda.

“Bella, are you angry at me for some reason?”

“Of course not.” I hated the eagerness in my voice. I hated how afraid I was to see her fall apart, again. I hated that I knew where her fault lines lay. I squeezed the cold soda can in my fist. “I’m just really ready to go to college.”

I passed her the can of Coke, and she took a sip. She pursed her lips, leaning further onto the counter.

“Must be exciting.” She rested her warm hand on my shoulder. Distracted, we both turned to watch the television that still hummed on low-volume.

“I still have a lot of packing to do.” I eased out of her grasp, but her cupped hand still hung in mid-air where my shoulder had been.

In the morning, I could feel her hovering in my doorway as I pretended to sleep. She sighed, fiddling with the handle of the reading lamp before grabbing hold of my suitcase and wheeling it out into the hall.

He came to the door smelling of hairspray and dressed in a navy blue polo sweater. He pretended not to crane his neck in search of a glimpse of my mother as he grabbed hold of my suitcase.

“She’ll be down in a minute,” I said.

“You look more and more like her every time I see you.” He reached in for a hug, and I let him, feeling for a moment like I was finally getting picked up from summer camp. I’d scrubbed the kitchen clean, and the scent of bleach wafted out of the kitchen.

“Hi, Peter,” my mom said, suddenly in the doorway. I turned to look back up at her and smile reassuringly. She’d put on pink lipstick. They never knew what to say to each other, but slipping inside I let them take responsibility for their own silence. In the window, I could see their reflection: both of them paper dolls unsure how to move their limbs. All they could do was keep saying they were sorry.

“Take care of my baby girl,” I heard my mom say as I climbed the stairs, and I knew she was looking him right in the eye.

“And you?”

I could hear her laugh, and then her voice turned cold. “Anna filled the freezer with lean cuisines and cookie dough.”

In my room, I closed the door behind me and grabbed a roll of packing tape off my dresser. I opened my closet and folded onto my knees, pulling the box marked *his* onto my lap. I grabbed the letter out of my pocket and placed it inside the box. I would let my mom keep the lamp.

Taping up the box, I squeezed tears back until my eyes burned. I paused for a moment before leaving the room, one hand on the doorknob and the box balanced on my hip.

“Ready for the road?” I asked, joining my parents again in the doorway. I turned and my mom wrapped me in her arms.

“Say good-bye to Roxie,” she said. As if on cue, Roxanne ambled into the doorway, and I stooped to kiss her once on the forehead.

“Have fun,” my mom continued. My dad rocked back and forth with his hands in his pockets. “Promise you’ll miss me.”

“Keep going to Curves,” I shouted too loudly as I followed my dad down the front walk.

“I couldn’t find your sweater,” I said, handing him the box as he opened the passenger door. “But I found some of your things.”

He held the box up to his eye-level and shook it. Nothing rattled. He nodded, brushing his fingers over the ridges of packing tape.

“I brought a cooler,” he said at last. He set the box on the floor in the backseat, covering it with a fleece stadium blanket. “Do you want a coke or something?”

I shook my head no and he climbed into the car. He cleared his throat, and the car filled suddenly with the smell of his sweat and the deep rasp of his voice.

I knew that she wouldn't cry in front of my dad, but I was shocked nonetheless by her composure. Posture perfect and lips pink, she almost looked like a glamorous starlet waving at us from the front porch as we drove away.

Pulling onto the black ribbon of the highway, I couldn't help but picture him alone with the box in a Holiday Inn on his way home from Middlebury. He would open the box and decide to read the note last. Sitting on the edge of the hotel bed, he'd arrange the tee-shirt and the clogs and the menu in a fan around him on the burgundy comforter. He'd unfold the note, again and again, straining to read my mom's perfect handwriting through the myriad creases in the expensive stationary.

Hands shaking and tears clawing at his throat, all he would see was her plea: *Annabelle needs you.*

"Is public radio ok?" he asked.

I whispered, "Yes." I opened my window and stretched my hand outside, waving my fingers through the warm wind.

I repeated it once more, just a little bit louder. "Yes, I'm fine."

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<sup>i</sup> Neruda, Pablo, *Selected Poems* Ed. Nathaniel Tarn (Boston, 1970):280-336.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>iii</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, *La Nausée* (1938) : (13).

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>v</sup> Biron, Michel and Francois Dumont, *Histoire de la Littérature Québécois* (Montreal, 2007) : 152.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid., 457.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid., 461.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid., 459.