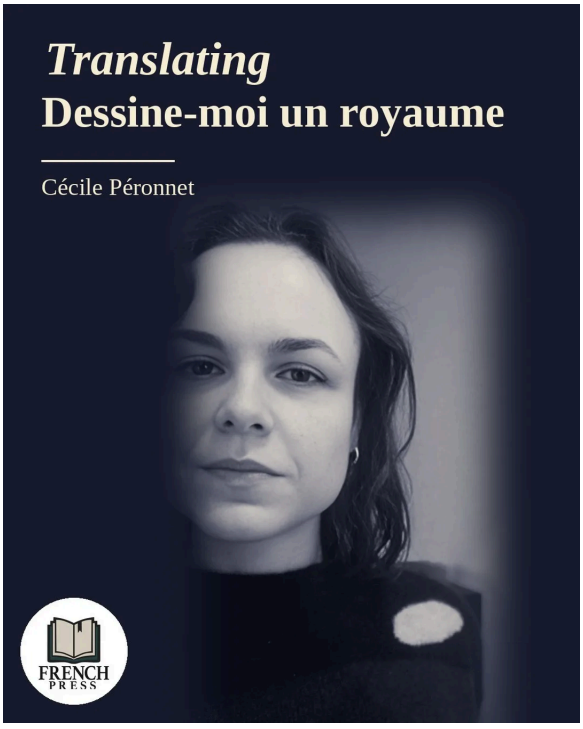
ESSAY

Translating *Dessine-moi un royaume*

by Cécile Péronnet

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Serving as a reader for foreign literature collections can sometimes feel like a treasure hunt. With every Word document received, every manuscript not quite finished by its author, not quite published yet or only just, comes the surprise, the discovery of a voice, a world, characters who will be introduced to English-speaking readers but perhaps not to those living in France. Crown, when it was still Crown, might never have made it to this side of the Atlantic. And yet.



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I took immense pleasure in translating this novel, winner of the High Plains Book Award, knowing that French readers would thus have the extraordinary chance to discover Evanthia Bromiley's writing, to meet the people who inhabit her imagination, and to let themselves be enveloped by everything that unfolds in these pages.

This is a debut novel that grips the heart, because it is beautiful and harsh, delicate and overflowing with a love greater than anything else, with a tenderness hidden in cardboard boxes and behind fogged-up windows, beneath a quilt and in a burning field, in the hollow of a river and under a roof that lets the night seep in. It belongs to those texts that leave an indelible mark on us, whose rhythm and voice continue to resonate, to beat faintly like the blood pulsing in our ears after the last page has been turned, the final word whispered.

Once you have met Evan, Virginia, and Jude, you will not forget them. They will stay by your side, tucked into a smile or nestled in a solitary tear. Their memory will find you in the early hours, in the middle of the night and beneath the sun's caress, emerging from a drawer, in the wake of a swallow, in a shadow cast by the moon, or in the lines of a drawing on a sidewalk. These three heroes of what Jakob Guanzon called a "heart-full roar" and an "epic of the ordinary" will certainly remain with me, too, as I tried to give them a French voice, one as memorable, as gentle and ardent as the one Evanthia Bromiley imagined for them.

This is the story of the three of them: a pregnant mother and her nine-year-old twins, whom she holds close with all her might, yet lets loose into the world so that their imagination might leave its mark upon it. Love is to this household what sugar is to the brioche Evan and Virginia bake for Jude, tempering the bitter orange, the harshness of existence, of memories, of a future they dare not quite imagine, despite the approaching birth, despite the house twisting and contracting in an effort to rid itself of them. It thus becomes the raw material for the Colorado-born debut novelist, allowing her to tell the story of ordinary lives in America without ever, or almost never, letting the sordid intrude upon these pages. It is also the story of their America, the America of welfare benefits and mobile homes, of boxes to be ticked, forgotten households and eviction notices, but above all of trifles, little treats, fairy tales whose endings are never quite said to have come undone, of colored ink running across bodies and walls where strange flowers bloom, chimeras come to life. Kirkus puts it this way: "*Draw Me a Kingdom* lets its grace unfold even amid deprivation."

> *"That morning, they get up as they always do. Damp. Marked by cotton kisses. Sleep has washed them clean. They are dried-out dreams clinging to their eyelashes. Summer sunburns framing their noses. They are tangled blond-brown hair, warm as a hug."*

A constellation of characters watches over them: a soldier who loves painting outdoors, a boy who paints the sky, a sentinel guarding the children's sleep, and other souls illuminated by their quiet kindness. But it is their three voices that mingle and answer one another, summon shimmering metaphors, burst with poetic sounds, and make language pulse, each infused with a vivid sense of identity. Evan the Gentle, the dreamer, the climber of talking trees, the guardian of his sister's innocence, though that innocence has already fled. Virginia the Fierce, the determined, the down-to-earth, the adventurer who no longer wants to listen to the

too-pretty stories her brother tells, except when grief, when life, become too hard. And Jude, too young, too burdened, the Poet of Small Things, the Mother-Hut, the bruised lover whose painful memories are nevertheless crossed by rainbows. Once, she asked her kind-hearted son and her resolute daughter, her Little Prince and her tin soldier, to draw her a kingdom on a mirror so that her melancholy would not quite overwhelm her. Now she, too, tries to build palaces for them, made of words that are reassuring but not too reassuring, clear-eyed but not too clear-eyed, of cardboard, the sheet metal of a car, or the fabric of dreams.

So let them show you their world and all the beauty that lies hidden in its folds. Watch their dreams unfurl and sometimes seep into reality. Listen to their secrets, their words woven from almost-lost innocence and melancholy, from a poetry that is visceral and inventive, playful and heartbreaking.

— Cécile Péronnet

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