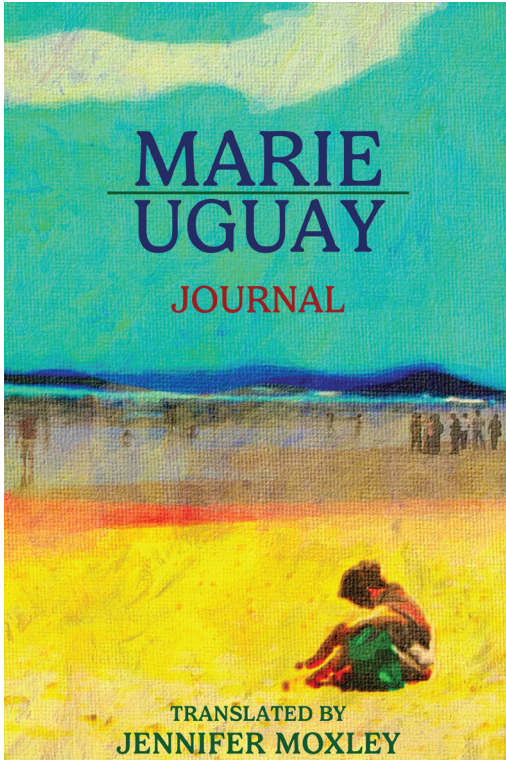


Excerpt from *Journal*
by Marie Uguay



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Journal

by Marie Uguay

Translated from the French by Jennifer Moxley

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[FIRST NOTEBOOK]**The Life Beyond**

November 15, 1977

It snowed this morning. The first snow since my body was mutilated. Silent little flakes of death. I feel like I'm lying on sheets of ice. Snow makes me feel both calm and endlessly sad. There is only this snow, relentless, divine, permeating my soul, everything else has vanished. I close my eyes and refuse to open them so I can concentrate on this expressionless music, this blankness: snow. When I rejoin the world, it will have been chilled by your gaze. Like a ghastly shadow, you frighten me even in daylight. Each of your precise and devastating steps is filled with death, while from the utmost heights of this wooziness I'm doing my best to find my life, looking for summer's sustenance and sun, its water and wind, the clarion call of the city. I'm trying to find the thousand heartbeats of a dream that will awaken every inch of my aching body. Despite all this snow, the birds will return; despite the walls of this room, my eyes will take flight. How have I managed to survive for so long attached to this bed, like a drowning victim, alone, so alone, with my legs in death's clutches? Will I see you again, my little love? And where will I go? Paris? Will I see Paris, if only for a day?

I can't go on. My nerves feel stretched so tight, as if my entire being is being menaced by some strange affliction. I feel a deep urgency to write poetry.

* * *

I carry you inside of me like a dead dawn

* * *

November 20, [1977]

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE LIFE BEYOND ALLIANCES

A breathless two years. At home in bed, I look through photos. That first November, a mix of death and joy. After burning with grief for two years following Grandpapa's death, I met Stéphan, and then he moved in with me. My place was half empty, the bare wood floors gleamed in the November cold. Stéphan brought his rugs with him, his colours, his photos, his wooden furniture. My plants grew miraculously large, the windows woke up. My hours took on a ritual quality, early mornings were honey coloured and in the blue satin of the long winter the twilight was orange. Then summer, winter, and summer again; this pearl necklace.

Like a single pillar, life can't be steadied. It becomes opaque. Nothing. Empty. A life shrunken, restrained, there isn't enough time to let a single moment, pregnant with potential like a terrible, marvellous fruit, slip away.

I'm not trying to make my thinking cohesive. So many hours

of physical pain have totally discombobulated my usual way of thinking.

I note: a gentle, cold rain hitting the skylights in a uniform rhythm. The fragile little cry of a faraway sparrow. In the distance, behind the apartment, the muffled cadence of cars gliding over wet asphalt. I feel an unparalleled delight hearing these everyday, common, and old sounds. The whole house breathes: the noise of the furnace, of the fridge; my breath keeps time with the rain hitting the window; I feel still and cold.

Stéphan's breathing. My heart swells, my life expands. No one should read these lines, maybe at some later date they'll go into a novel. For the time being, they'll stay live weapons, and then there's my sudden burst of love. I'm still amazed by it, and skeptical. I look at Stéphan. For two years, we've been like two kids, stable and happy. I look at him. Connection, desire, astonishment, his immense arms, generous, comforting, vast like a beautiful summer afternoon; always ready to hold me. I want him to take me in them again and again. Connection, emotion, I read so much into him; he is transparent, pure and profound like a secret, primordial natural spring.

His kindness moves me, his intelligence seduces me, but more importantly, the beauty of his face, which isn't just the way his features are arranged, but goes further than that, I don't know where. Unnameable.

Louis, a puzzle, endlessly incendiary. So many uncertainties, contradictions, yet so many flights. An elusive face, though his hands are extraordinary open rivers. I love him in spite of him. No one can understand these two intersecting trajectories, even me. But they are real, they ring true like metal. Unalloyed. Pure.

I love them both passionately with a life force that overpowers me

(both of them? maybe even all three). What matters is the force. Right now, I can see each of them in freeze-frame. My focused attention on them overflows. They'll change places, I'm sure of it. I have this fierce longing to dive into them. To give? To receive? My feelings transcend such terms. It's a kind of journey, an astonishment. A magnetic current, inviolable, inexhaustible, which no single face could possibly satisfy. Where nothing is refused and there's no meanness: Love! But at what cost? Solitude. My love is like an outpouring, a wellspring. Will it turn into a tower? Insurmountable? No, that would be impossible.

My life is enriched by having multiple passions at once. I won't name all the other faces in case this starts to sound like some crazy story I've just made up. I can't describe it all in one go, it's too vast.

* * *

December 8 or 9, 1977

A perfect blue powder outside the window.

Nice and cozy inside, the hail's interfering music sounds to me like a sequence of love poems dedicated to different households, all customized, each word typed forcefully.

The powder creates a cinematic play of light: blues and whites moving about.

Don't say anything, just believe that poetry is more astute and true, more alive than prose. It's efficient, says a lot with little, and so serendipitously that even the writer stands in wonder. The poem waiting to be written is always a discovery, a new continent.

* * *

I attempt, in this new mutilated body, to move about the way I used to. Physically disoriented in this conquered country that used to be my body. Tears.

* * *

December 13, 1977

In the apartment, alone, evening, feeling nostalgic already. I have changed so little it's almost a disappointment. My body is changed, mutilated, turned into an other, well, almost an other. A different environment, which moves differently, but my heart is still its old self. An anvil, an anchor, as heavy and indefatigable as ever. I think about those two months I spent chained to a bed, eyes glued to the blue wall of that sad hospital room. I remember the pain, my frequent howling over that attached leg, and my fear, which stood by the door and kept watch; it imprisoned me at the bottom of a well, crushed me with those tombstone nights. It steered me toward your dear eyes and your hands, which held my hands, clenched and desperate, and kept them safe. I'd never known faces such as yours, they were completely new to me, but I only needed two months. My pattern is always the same. And now we no longer talk. I fear that our paths are diverging, separating, moving apart, as so often happens. But I've got my dreams and my city back, its soft clouds and tired skies, my Montréal freshly tensed with frost. I inhale this glowing room, the trees in the distance, the faceless passersby, all my daydreams. Yet your faces and the things we talked about keep insisting. Louis, with his turbulence,

his pointless promises, his sadness, always looking so wiped-out; the way he takes off his glasses, wipes his hand across his forehead and over his eyes, just to the bridge of his nose, right between his eyebrows. Paul, with his silent entrances, that impenetrable way he had of looking at me like I was an enigma. His attention and curiosity made me so self-conscious I'd talk even more than usual. Calm, reassuring. His interest made me feel special.

I barely knew either of them. But because I was undergoing such a terrible trauma, I took their affection and generosity for real outbursts of love. At the centre of this traumatic chapter, their actions took on an inflated importance. One was the first to discover my cancer, the other my only lifeline, that is, if the treatments had been effective. Then maybe I would still have my leg. But there was a dark prediction of my next undoing.

It's all still so confusing.

I'm jotting down these notes quickly, so as not to forget anything. I'm not sure why, but I now feel I need to make a record of this story, even though it's fast becoming unreal to me. But what is the source of this unreality? Perhaps its sharpness. Yesterday I felt calm, I did nothing, Stéphan and I were good together and talked in hushed and dreamy tones about taking a trip. Then it came out of nowhere, the cut-off. That reality so vast my mind can't process it: death. And all these other men suddenly in my life. Men from worlds so unlike my own, who think so differently. Two men connected to my death, not because they wanted to be, but just like me, victims of chance. "Chance kills," says Brel.³ And despite our different ways of talking, a dialogue developed, a double dialogue. Louis, always in a hurry, never listening, always talking. Paul, slow, silent, standing before me, letting me go on too long. One's a comedian, the other a spectator.

Right now, I feel good. The nightmare is letting me be. I make

up a dream that conforms to my desires and slowly exhaust its possibilities, just for myself. I love them both tenderly, each differently and in secret, as if I was fifteen years old. I tell myself the story of the novel that I will never write. About this person who leaves for the hospital on the night of September 15, heading into the unknown, the sudden horror. Now, daily life has been restored and everything is almost the same as it was before. It's a question of balance. Learning how to balance on one leg. Learning that my leg is no longer there, that it will never again be there, never. Just to get used to this idea. To recognize that I'm still alive, but for how long? I have no idea, nor how to take advantage of each moment. On the other hand, there's Stéphan, with his bottomless eyes, eyes like giant luminous towers ... our friendship, our tender bond, whispers and then laughter. We share so many dreams, so many of the same urgencies, the same hopes, the same worries, the same tastes. With him, I can breathe easy. But love doesn't issue from just one spring, there are other tributaries, farther away but very real, as clear as stories made up by a child.

I think about life. I imagine other places. At night, I travel through landscapes by great leaps. An airport, another American city, angular, shiny, with greenish nights, or a villa under the palms of Provence, the sea, and then Paris. My own room in Paris. The measureless intoxication of one day being able to say when opening a window or walking down the street: "Paris is mine." I'm in Paris, every one of its arrondissements feeds my reveries such that living poems spring from the stones, pavements, porticos, skies, and trees of Paris. To live life to the fullest, not waiting for anyone, collecting memories, loving. And if tomorrow I never see them again, or see past their words, grown stern once at a distance from me and my trauma (the crisis over, they bolt), if I never see them again, I will continue to love them. I will always remember those

days, those hours they stayed by my side. Perhaps I love them without knowing them; it doesn't matter. I have my way of knowing them.

And now, how should I go about starting over, and what exactly am I starting over? What do I have left? Already I had nothing, except for the freedom to come and go. An afternoon in a café, meetings, dreams, work, as well as walks through Montréal, the cold, dry, brutal winter, a thin strip of countryside in the distance. Now I must wait. I can no longer do much of anything without help. When Stéphan is not at home, I am useless. There's too much silence in this apartment. It's making me write these stupid things. Because I'm being stalked by these floods of silence, the poems I'm not writing, this internal standstill, this waiting, impenetrable, unchanging, wild. Your voices trail off. I love you. It's written, as if carved in stone. This hard reality inside of me, laughable, sickly, heartbreaking. I keep it inside, no one can measure the impact of what has happened to me, not even me, really. My entire future keeps slipping through my hands.

And my body, which I barely recognize in the mirror. My face looks the same, but when I look at this body, I waver between affection and fear. This body, my body, inside of which I feel ill at ease. My head turns like a bird, or the sun, still the same, still pursuing its crazy romantic escapades. The little body at its centre with its two frail arms also rolls, like a ball. Since the leg can no longer hold it up, it rolls toward the right, sways, in need of an airlift. My other leg is a thread, with all of my body's weight pressing down on it. And in my dreams, I can't see who I've become; I try, that's it! Without my leg, with crutches ... or with this artificial leg. I don't have the strength to imagine this any more than I do my death.

Had I known sooner, would they have been able to save my

leg? In June, those beautiful fragrant and lazy days, I was happy. I had a slight limp. I thought it was due to the cold. I felt a little pain in my leg. Would they have been able to save it if I had known then and not in the fall? September 15, trembling with terror and in tears; rain then greyness ...

I try and return to my old routine, take up my old ways of doing things, but it isn't the same. I've completely changed physically, and there are the bruises left behind by those interminable days of pain that carved up both my body and spirit. And my love. Falling in love during such a heavy time was like summoning a light in the middle of the darkness, a gentle oblivion, a way to forget my banal and dry reality, if only temporarily. This wellspring of emotion ... but now I'm hit by the ever-growing silence, hard. Start over, forget this hurricane. I throw out these little words in haste to keep myself from completely dying inside. At this moment, it's difficult. What will I do tomorrow? Write like this, without purpose, order, or calm? Not even bothering to form sentences. What kind of poem is this? What sort of text even? And these days when I can't even go outside weigh heavily on my shoulders. The snow, the ice, get it? Dragging these rotten crutches, which drag me down. And time, which slowly sucks me in. All that's left for me to do is to write down in these sparse little sentences the few memories of my experience I can still recall, though they're somewhat blurry, made dim by the drugs and the pain, and by the monotony of my days.

I know I'm writing it down so it's not all lost. I went to the edge of death, into an endless night, bumping into people and things. Exhausted, completely wiped out by an almost sleepless night, interrupted by faint, neurotic dreams trying to pull me back up to the surface.