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Translator's Preface

Marie Ramsland

Raymond Bozier remembers¹ beginning to write at school when asked to describe a painting of his own choosing. The combination of vibrant colours and the depiction of violence in Delacroix's "The Lion Hunt" inspired the sensitive adolescent to express his emotions in traditional poetic form. At eighteen, he decided to turn away from the approaches of well-established poets and discover his own form. This resulted in two major collections: *Bords de mer* (1998 Flammarion), and *Abattoirs 26* (1999 Pauvert). Frustrated with the difficulties to publish poetry and its small readership, Bozier set about writing short stories. But the public wanted novels!

So at 37, he turned his hand to writing his first novel, which proved extremely challenging. Concentrating on each page as he would a poem, he aimed at creating harmony between content and style or "shape". The result was his award-winning novel published in 1997 (Calmann-Lévy), *Lieu-dit*², dealing with themes of isolation, silence, violence and rural disintegration. His second novel, *Rocade* (2000 Pauvert) is set in his own suburb of La Pallice in coastal La Rochelle and deals with society's silence concerning the unemployed and homeless in an urban environment. Silence and violence are also major themes of his third novel, *Les Soldats somnambules* (2002 Pauvert), a title that evokes war, and here it is the Algerian War – the war that inspired *Le Caporal Couteau*.

Bozier's stories are fictions based on fact and intimate personal knowledge. Trained as a historian, he believes that, for a writer, it is essential to take real events, remove them from their historical confines, recompose them imaginatively, and then place them back into circulation where they may have an impact on the lives of human beings and help them better understand those events. He stresses the importance of distinguishing between history and fiction.

¹ Interview with the author recorded at his home in La Pallice, 10 October 2002.

² Two awards recognised this outstanding first novel: *le Prix du Premier Roman & le Prix du Livre en Charente-Maritime*.

In 2004, Bozier published a collection of poetic prose passages entitled *Fenêtres sur le monde* (Fayard), an allusion to the restaurant on the 110th floor of one of the Twin Towers destroyed on 11 September 2001. These pieces are concerned with themes found in his novels and poems.

Knowing Bozier's tendency to read his prose aloud, 'like a monk reciting his prayers', I 'listened to' the translated words chosen in order to transfer the images, emotions, rhythms and sounds present in his short story. Treating the work as poetic prose imbued with 'primitivism', I decided to stay as close to the original as possible so that this aspect would dominate. The translator fails inevitably to translate the "singularity" of the original text in which signifier and signified are inseparable³. Thus emphasis was placed on conveying the "message" and the language used – an interpretive approach aligned with linguistic analysis. Communication with the author was also advantageous. A balance was needed to ensure the shock element of the short story was not lost in translation.

³ See Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, University of Chicago Press, 1981.

"Corporal Cutthroat" by Raymond Bozier

Translated by Marie Ramsland

Lying on his back in the meadow, Aloys contemplated the sky, taking in deep breaths of the warm country smells. Every now and then he would lift his arms, spread his fingers out in front of his face and narrow his eyes. When the universe was reduced to the size of a small patch of shadow broken here and there by shiny spots, he would close his hands and in his fists methodically crush the stars. But it all went back to its original state, the stars, the vastness, the unfathomable profundity of the night, and then he would open his mouth and bite into the empty void. But darkness has no taste. Aloys really wanted to devour the entire darkness that engulfed the world, to crunch it between his teeth until the white bone of day appeared. Toads and frogs swallow the night in big gulps too, but they immediately spit it out again in the form of short single notes, delicate crystalline sounds, like mysterious repetitive words that fuse together to confront the terrifying tranquility of infinite space. The "soft spuds," as Aloys liked to call them, were everywhere: near the pond, along the length of the wall that provided a border between the road and the farm, among the roots of trees, under stones, in ditches, squatting on the ground with their feet firmly folded underneath their bodies, their stomachs full of insects they had stolen in the dark.

The boy had only to close his eyelids for a few seconds for the transfusion to take place, for the quiet chanting to spread within him – a form of sweet intoxication. Yet the previous night he had silenced the toads. To force them to shut up more effectively, he had taken an electric battery, a cloth bag made of jute, and he captured them one by one despite his intense dislike of their cold, warty skins. They squirmed in the bottom of the bag. The creatures climbed up, pushed against the cloth looking for a way out. As if they had been waiting for this moment to take charge, the crickets made the most of the situation by increasing their din. They also had something to say at night! They didn't stop spluttering as they came out of their holes, moving their antennas and rubbing their outer wings.... Then the boy put down his bag and ran through the meadow in every direction to force them back into their holes and once and for all shut their

'traps'. Which is just what they did. There is nothing more yellow-bellied than a cricket.

Then Aloys could really listen to what was happening above him in the great expanse, but he heard nothing, not a creak nor a bark. He saw nothing out of the ordinary either — apart from a falling star, whose passage was so fleeting that he wondered if he had really seen it. The boy set the frogs and the toads free as soon as he had scrutinised the sky long enough and to no avail. He turned the bag upside down and watched them fall higgledy-piggledy onto the grass, find their feet and then scatter, jumping and knocking into one another, and flee in search of new places of refuge. All this without paying him the slightest attention, or trying to find out why the power, which had forced them carelessly to the bottom of a starless pit with no moon, had suddenly decided to release them. You should never count on anything out of the ordinary from toads; they only go where their jumps take them; they eat what chance provides them at night and they live the same as they die, without looking for applause or congratulations from anyone. When stones crush them, or when the smoke they are forced to swallow makes them explode, no other toad comes to pity them or to cry over their fate. There are only magpies, crows and scavenger insects that take an interest in their corpses and derive some flavour from them.

That evening, Aloys didn't mind the noise of the prairie dwellers. He didn't try to impose his law on them. He let the warmth of the earth penetrate his body. He closed his eyes. He withdrew into his shell and in so doing blocked out the wide universe. He stayed stuck to the earth like a snail devoid of force and exhausted from the splendours of the night. A snail that had decided once and for all not to worry about Sputniks that circled the earth. Last winter, the Russians even found a way to fix a hermetically sealed capsule to their rocket and to place a small dog in it, Laïka. Sputnik and its passenger orbited the earth for six days and nights. Then the temperature gauge broke down and the little dog died. A little later, during the mid-day meal, a journalist explained on the radio that Laïka had not been sacrificed in vain. Because of human ingenuity and with the help of one of their most faithful companions, a new era had just begun in conquering space. Now we could expect men to benefit from the experiment and one day soon to attack the great universe...

Not one of the farm workers around the table that day had anything to say about what they had heard on the radio. Only grandfather grumbled in his beard: "I don't give a shit about an attack. After the atomic bomb and what happened in Algeria, now it's time to send dogs off to wander around in space ...". Then he emptied his wineglass and said no more. It was from this day on that the boy kept a close eye on what was happening in the sky and, one evening very soon, he hoped to hear another traveller up among the stars barking so loudly that all the farm dogs chained up would answer him. But for now the only thing he could make out was the sound of a car that out there in the countryside seemed to be coming somewhere from behind him. He raised himself up on one elbow and looked in the direction of the road. When the headlights began to light up the wall at the end of the track, he got up and ran towards the dark mass of buildings. So that he would not be seen, he bent over double as he ran. He scampered towards the large shed where the farming equipment was kept. It was the best spot to see the windows of the owners' house and to check out what was happening in their large yard. When the car got clear of the porch, he had just enough time to bend down behind a haymaker that smelled of old iron and cut grass. He was getting his breath back when the Simca drove slowly onto the gravel, turned onto the lawn and stopped in front of the kitchen entrance. Although the motor had been turned off, the yellow glow of the headlights still lit up the façade. Everything now was silent and completely still both inside and outside the car. Aloys was alone and his heart beat relentlessly against his ribs. The lights went out. The flickering flame of a cigarette lighter lit up the front of the car. The owner's wife, Mrs. Maurice, was smoking a last Gitane before getting out. Her left arm was stretched out along the side door. What could she be thinking of?

One evening, the boy had gone with her to the cinema in town. He still remembered vaguely what she said when they got back, as the Simca bumped along the stony darkness causing white dust to fly up behind it. "See Aloys, driving at night is like the cinema but in reverse. Before, everything appeared frozen. There were only tableaux to depict life. Now, there is always something happening, something moving all the time. We stay for two hours in the dark without moving with the projector humming, looking at people acting, people who probably we can never get near; we see them moving on the screen, walking in the open, driving,

killing one another, loving, arguing and then, two hours later, we get into the car and still seated we perform a kind of about-turn and we force our way into the scenery, lighting up the trees, the rabbits and the sleeping villages. That's progress, Aloys!"

The farmhands didn't always understand what Mrs. Maurice was talking about. So she often repeated that she had given birth to seven children and seen thousands of films. (In Paris she saw four or five each week. When she came to the country on holidays or for the winter slaughter of pigs, she had to settle for one.) "Perhaps that's better than having had thousands of children and seeing only seven films....," someone ironically commented one day behind her back.

When the car door opened, Aloys stepped a little away from the haymaker. The driver had no trouble filling all the space available in the tiny two-seater Simca, so much so that it was always a strange sight watching how she got out. He wouldn't want to miss this sight for anything in the world, even if he only saw it from behind and from a distance. The fat woman did it exactly the same way every time: at first she would place one foot on the ground, then after making sure she had a firm hold, she gripped the edge of the roof with her left hand, pivoted on her bottom and emerged with absolute caution from her chrysalis, while the chrysalis tilted dangerously to one side as far as the shock absorbers would allow and then righted itself as its bulky cargo left it.

This evening, Mrs. Maurice seemed in no hurry to go to bed. Instead of opening the kitchen door, she chose to walk slowly over the lawn. You might think she was hoping to take advantage of the silent, cool night but she was actually watching the random track made by a moped on the path lined with apple trees. It was one of farmhands, Dédé the "machine-gunner" coming home. The peasants gave him this nickname because, since returning from military service, whenever he drank too much, he was in the habit of pushing doors violently with his foot and bombarding the place with resounding rat-a-tat-tat, rat-a-tat-tat, as if he were still firing at the rebel Algerians.... Every evening, he met up with his army mates in the small cottage that belonged to an old lime kiln hidden in the woods. Even if no one knew what was said there, everyone knew they came back completely drunk every time. Mrs. Maurice didn't like drunks so she stood at the porch exit to intercept the guilty person and reason with him.

Dédé only caught sight of her at the last moment and in order to avoid her he was forced to perform spectacular swerves and zigzags on the lawn. "Bloody hell! What's this, another ambush?" he said trying to put his feet back on the bike's pedals. These fellaheen,⁴ the bastards, won't ever let me go!"

Mrs Maurice didn't like swearwords either. "No Education!" she said heading steadfastly for the shed where the moped's taillight had just gone out. Aloys had changed his spot. He was hiding behind the huge iron wheel of the old Cormick-Dering 18-22. "The fellaheen! The fellaheen!" Aloys whispered, frightened as much by these words as the possibility of being discovered.

The bike snorted in the dust and died. Dédé "the machine-gunner" let it fall over with the engine still running. He took out his flick knife. Back there in the Algerian hills he wasn't called Dédé "the machine-gunner," but Corporal Cutthroat. "Brreew," he snorted and tried to make out the silhouette coming towards him. "Dunno what I see any longa, and no longa know what I am. Come on, come closer, my little rabbit so I can cut out your eye and expose your bones...." And then he was quiet. He looked hard at Mrs. Maurice as if he was seeing a ghost.

"What's got into you André? What are you doing with that knife?" she asked him as she stepped carefully back.

"Shit, ya frightened me!"

"Oh dear, still using swearwords! You know we don't like that."

"Swearwords never hurt no-one. And them's nothin' compared with being afraid."

"Perhaps you wouldn't be so afraid if you drank less."

"It's obvious you don't know much," Dédé answered closing the knife.

"How's that?"

"Yes, alcohol and fear! What goes in one end and what comes out the other, you know nothing! You can't even begin to imagine...."

"Okay, we'll talk about that later on, André. In the meantime, you should go to bed. There's work to be done tomorrow."

⁴ Fellaheen / fellahin, plural of fellah (Arabic), refers to peasant/s of Arab-speaking countries, here North Africa.

"Work, family, country, you rich folk know only a smidgen about these things. But don't you worry. Tomorrow Dédé will be up on time. He'll have his sleeves rolled up and do what he has to for this country of cows, the big family of pigs, horses, sheep, ducks and guinea-fowl."

"You've no idea of what you're saying. It's time you were asleep."

"Yes, boss!" I'll go to bed, close my eyes like everyone does, because no one in this godforsaken country wants to see anything. Everyone pretends to be deaf and blind, except when the poor soldiers return from the lime kiln. Then they're not embarrassed to make comments about them."

"Fine! Good night, André!"

"I dunno what a good night is any more, Missus. The less I sleep, the better I am...."

When the grown-ups had gone inside, the boy came out of his hiding place. He went through the gate, past a building and came up to Dédé the machine-gunner's bedroom. Keeping close to the wall, with his back against the shutters, he waited until the light went out. When the snoring began, he climbed in through the open window, pulled the curtain back and carefully crawled to the wooden stool at the top of the bed. The room smelt of cheap grog, sweat and petrol. Dédé was asleep fully dressed. He had stuck his knife in the stool and emptied his pockets as he did every night before going to sleep. After running his hand slowly over the improvised bedside table, the boy grabbed a packet of cigarettes and a large box of matches. Dédé rolled over and grumbled a few words, "The brambles, watch out for the brambles!" then stopped. Every night Dédé would cry out, groaning as if he were being beaten. Sometimes his cries would wake the dogs. Grandfather, who knew things, for he had been in the two great wars, said that the memory of battle kept coming back and it would continue to do so and that it would always pursue him even when he was in his grave. No one ever asked Dédé about what he had done or seen in Algeria. They preferred to let him fight his ghosts by himself.

The boy was once more in the field. Now he could breathe again and look at his spoil lying on the grass. A small light, something like daylight, lit up the area. There were only three cigarettes left in the Fontenoy packet. The boy put one between his lips and grabbed the box of matches. It was stuffed with cotton. He gently lifted the first layer and stared, his eyes wide open. At the bottom of the box on a thin piece of gauze lay a dried-

up ear, a man's ear, a fellah's ear, now deaf to the delicate chanting of the night.