



Interview with Cécile Cormier

Pascale Antolin: when did you first write this short story, Cécile, and in what language?

Cécile Cormier: This short story was initially written in English, when three years ago I took part in a creative writing summer session at Oxford where I had originally applied for the poetry workshops. I've written poems in French and English for years, and I've always been curious about how such classes were taught. I was delighted to be admitted to the program, but as part of the program's organization I needed to select another workshop, and I picked "fiction." Our final assignment consisted in writing a piece of fiction, an excerpt or a short story. I wrote it during our last weekend at Oxford, with no plan whatsoever yet sure that my command of the English language would be too limited, and that I would lack both time and inspiration to come up with anything substantial... As it turned out, not only did my little story develop in a self-evident manner, but to my utter surprise it was granted the highest rank although there were seasoned and published authors in the class and I was the only one whose mother-tongue was not English!

PA. How did it occur to you to write about China and Chinese calligraphy in particular?

CC. The author who was teaching the class encouraged us to play with clichés and stereotypes. I lived in China for five years, and I still visit the country on a very regular basis. So I have to admit that I opted for the easy solution of relying on clichés and stereotypes that I had witnessed or experienced first-hand and decided to set the story in China. As for calligraphy, I've had a passionate interest in the written word as an esthetic expression since childhood. I've practiced western calligraphy from an early age, and started learning Chinese calligraphy when I first had the opportunity to live there.

PA. Is there an autobiographical dimension to the story?

CC. I'm afraid the only autobiographical dimension to the story is the interest that I have in the hand-written word and for calligraphy in general. But so far, I haven't inherited any valuable scrolls or engraved seals from a great Chinese master...!

PA. Why did you feel like translating it?

CC. To be honest, it was not my idea. The author who was teaching the class encouraged me to continue my story as for her it was more like the beginning of a novel, and she suggested I translate it in French as well. Back in France, many among my relatives and friends made the same suggestion.

PA. What difficulty, if any, did you face in the process?

CC. I graduated in American literature and linguistics, and I've taught translation to undergraduates for years, so translating literary pieces from French to English and English to French is familiar territory. Nevertheless, translating one's own literary work lends fresh perspectives to the exercise. You know exactly what you meant when you wrote what you wrote, you don't feel restrained by the text itself because it's all yours, and you grant yourself the liberty to revisit, to reshape it (even in both languages if you feel like it), as if freed from the fate of the *traduttore/traditore*! In fact, my only concern and difficulty while I was translating my own text turned out to be a question of voice: to recreate in the other language the voice I originally had in my head/in mind that was telling the story, and the voices of the different

characters. So surprisingly it ended up being a question of voice recognition. As you translate your own text, at some point you recognize in the other language what sounds like the right voice of the character, somewhat in the same way as when you listen to the radio, you hear the continuous flow of words uttered by unknown speakers, and suddenly you recognize a familiar voice.