

Emmanuelle Guattari. *I, Little Asylum*. Transl. E. C. Belli. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014. ISBN: 1584351373.

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I, Little Asylum is the English translation by E. C. Belli of Emmanuelle Guattari's debut short novel, *La Petite Borde*. First published in French in 2012, the work draws on Guattari's experiences as a child living at "La Borde" psychiatric clinic in the Loire Valley, France. Born in 1964, she was the daughter of French psychotherapist Félix Guattari, who worked at the clinic from the mid-1950s, and she spent much of her childhood alongside her brothers wandering the clinic's extensive grounds and interacting with its residents. Founded in 1953 by psychiatrist Jean Oury, La Borde was a progressive institution that aimed to "give back to the word *asylum* its initial meaning: that of a shelter against danger, a refuge where one could live in peace."¹ It drew on the principles of institutional psychotherapy or "anti-psychiatry," which opposed the power dynamic inherent in traditional therapist-patient relationships and which, within France, sought to reorganise the system that had enabled the "soft extermination" of hundreds of thousands of psychiatric patients under German occupation during World War II.² To this end, La Borde was designed as a "communist utopia" founded on a collective lifestyle in which both staff and patients interacted and contributed to the running of the clinic.³ Félix Guattari contributed significantly to its progressive agenda and went so far as to give it a reputation as a hotbed for intellectuals, conscientious objectors to the Algerian war and Marxist supporters of the 1968 revolt in France. This was the environment in which Emmanuelle Guattari grew up, before moving to Paris to study history and eventually to New York where

she began teaching French and English. Since publishing *La Petite Borde* she has written another two short novels, *Ciels de Loire* (2013) and *New York, petite Pologne* (2015), both of which are based on her personal experiences and are yet to be translated into English. E. C. Belli's translation of *La Petite Borde* was published in 2014, which coincidentally was the same year La Borde's founder passed away.

The text is divided into two parts that roughly align to earlier and later periods in the memories of the protagonist Manou, and each part takes the form of imagistic vignettes with individual titles. The vignettes offer extended descriptions of daily life in the clinic alongside brief humorous accounts of family pets, adult blunders and childhood play, but they may not satisfy the reader who is after a straightforward account, as they jump back and forth in time and present passing moments that seem of little import to a broader narrative. There are experiences of child-like wonder involving floor tiles and sewerage facilities, there are childhood pranks played with yoghurt and switchboards, there are chaotic family moments shared when Manou's father brings home a pet monkey, when he reveals his fear of rats and when he tries to defend his family against a giraffe. There is moving insight into a child's perspective on death through Manou's imagined communion with her dead mother and later, her dead father, but perhaps the most unique element of this perspective is what it has to offer on the condition of "madness." The narrator says that while growing up at La Borde she learned to separate "the madness from the most fundamentally human exchanges" (21), enabling her to interact and come to feel affection for many of the patients whom she was encouraged to call the "Residents." Manou seems to know that this atmosphere contrasts with the general attitude toward the clinic as a "fantastical presence" that induces the "fear of the *Insane*" (20), but in her eyes, the residents are simply "grown-ups," bearing authority and being stronger than the children (20). For those readers interested in the cultural and historical background of La Borde, this childhood perspective offers insight into the damage wreaked by the war on individuals in France, for example on her mother who doesn't like cake or on the affectionately named "The Tench" who doesn't like turnips. There are also glimpses of contemporary political tensions when her father's position as a "suitcase carrier" for the Algerian war comes under scrutiny, or when she interprets the many political posters and magazines scattered around her.

Prior to working with Guattari's text, the Swiss-born E. C. Belli had introduced into English the poetry of Pierre Peuchmaurd and the autobiography of French militant Stéphane Hessel. This placed her in a good position to translate a text that is at once a poetic childhood memoir and a child's insight into madness, war and the militant politics of mid-twentieth-century

Europe. Her approach to the translation seems sometimes to play with the presence of the French that lingers amongst the English, reflecting the narrative's emphasis on imaginative childhood play and offering rich textual layers that are discernible in some instances to the French-speaking Anglophone reader and in others to the non-French speaking reader. An example of the former can be found in the title: *I, Little Asylum* is a break-down of the various inferences of the French *La Petite Borde*, where the insertion of *petite* into the name of the asylum conflates the identity of the little girl protagonist with the identity of the institution. The English title presents the subjectivity of the narrator on the one hand and of the institution on the other, separated explicitly with the comma, and yet the word *little* connotes a sense of home and girlhood fantasy that ultimately renders both identities indistinguishable. On the contents page the reader comes across more visible forms of the text's original language, as Belli has left the occasional vignette title in French; some of these are likely to be incomprehensible to the non-French speaker, as in "La Chauffe," while others are familiar or contextualised to some extent, as in "The Nouvelles Galeries" or "Régilait Milk." These initial *mélanges* of French and English set the reader up to expect a translingual text that isn't afraid to draw on and play with its source language.

In sum, the work of Guattari and, subsequently, of Belli, lends itself to a range of reading experiences and tastes, whether there is interest in multilingual literary techniques, the genre of childhood memoir, or the historical context of La Borde as a progressive and militant hub. While the clinic planted the seeds for Félix Guattari's later work alongside Gilles Deleuze on the concepts of *schizoanalysis*, *rhizome* and *deterritorialization*,⁴ its inspiration for Emmanuelle Guattari's perceptive and colourful account of innocence attests to a contribution beyond the psychoanalytical and philosophical. It could even be said that the role of La Borde as an "asylum" in the true sense of the word was extended not only to its patients, but to its children whose view of a troubling world outside could unfold slowly in its open environment.

NOTES

¹ Nicolas Philibert, "About La Borde," accessed August 28, 2015, http://www.nicolas-philibert.fr/media/objets_telechargeables/MDC-ABOUT-LA-BORDE-EN.pdf

² Arran James, "French Psychiatry Under Occupation: Saint-Alban," *Attempts at Living* (blog), June 4, 2014, <https://attemptsatliving.wordpress.com/2014/06/04/french-psychiatry-under-occupation-saint-alban/>.

³ Anna Helle, "The Philosophical Friendship of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari," *Ephemera* 8, no. 4 (2008): 491.

⁴ Paul Elliot, *Guattari Reframed: Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 16.