
Marie Gagnon

Shelter*

Translated from the French by Ronald Conrad

*Born in 1966 to a middle-class family in a Montreal suburb, Marie Gagnon showed early sensitivity to words and dreams. Then after her studies at l'UQAM (the University of Quebec at Montreal), she lived a time of revolt that took her to the street. There she became a heroin addict, spending several years with the friend who in her memoir she calls "The Prince," and refers to also as "le philosophe des philosophes" — the philosopher of philosophers. As she and her companion experienced hunger, illness, time in hospitals, and the dangers of street life, Gagnon developed her very specialized approach to shoplifting: she learned to steal books, only the best ones, and sometimes even books on commission, to resell and support her heroin habit. Her time in prison followed, during which she wrote the vivid memoir that was published in 1997 as *Bienvenue dans mon cauchemar* (Welcome to My Nightmare). It is a collection of poems, journal entries, memories and perceptions as Gagnon attempts to reconcile her previous life with her life behind bars. As the Montreal newspaper *Le Devoir* put it, Gagnon had moved from stealing books to writing them.*

I dreamed about our life on the street. We were cold and hungry. My toes had lost their nails, and the deep snow made walking hard. Sick and broke, we were looking for shelter. The Prince^o could no longer stand. Shaken by a dry cough, he advanced bent over, as if hit in the stomach. We had no place to stay, no hope of help, and the police were after us. Just now we had been chased from an apartment building, where for a few minutes under the stairs of the fire escape we had warmed ourselves in each other's arms.

Then suddenly it appeared, imposing and beautiful in the storm. Its steeple was lost in the sky and its portal floated as if suspended. For a moment I saw angels and heard the organ. It warmed me inside. The Prince was at the end of his strength, but, gripping his arm, I made him

* Translator's title.

^o The Prince: Gagnon's name for her long-time companion, also a heroin addict.

Back at his side, I put my coat over his shoulders and helped him up. Without looking back, we resumed our search for shelter.

Explorations:

<http://csf.colorado.edu/homeless/index.html>

1. "Shelter" is one of the shortest pieces in this anthology. Is it long enough to make its point? Does it give enough detail to become more than summary? Does it give a "picture" of Gagnon's life on the street?
2. As a *narrative*, is "Shelter" developed through pure *chronology*? Does it ever stray from straight time order?
3. Point out at least five words or expressions of TRANSITION that speed Gagnon's *narrative*.

1. In the way it is told, does "Shelter" resemble the dreams you have? How? Or when Gagnon says "I dreamed about our life on the street," do you take "dreamed" in the sense of "thought" or "remembered"? Give reasons for your view.
2. Here is the first paragraph of our selection in the original French:

J'ai rêvé à l'époque où nous vivions la rue. Nous avions froid et faim. Mes orteils n'avaient plus d'ongles et je marchais difficilement dans la neige épaisse. Nous étions malades et sans argent, à la recherche d'un refuge. Le Prince ne tenait plus sur ses jambes. Secoué par une toux sèche, il avançait