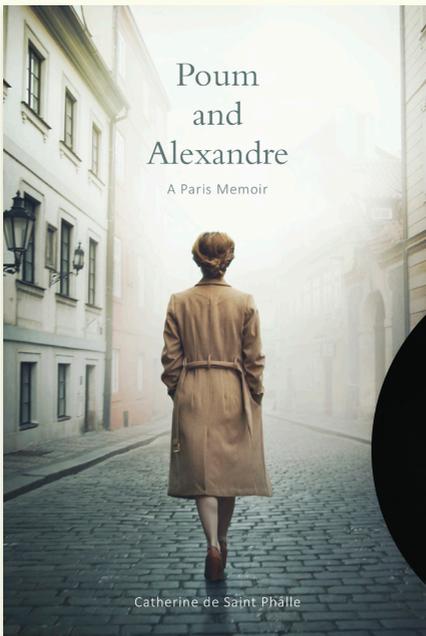




2017 STELLA PRIZE SHORTLIST

Sampler



Catherine de Saint Phalle
POUM AND ALEXANDRE

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Arles

My mother, Marie-Antoinette, likes strange and sad things. It makes me want to save her from the rue du Cirque, where she lives, behind the gardens of the Élysée palace. I dream of taking her away from the concierge who frightens her, the family that seems to dislike her, and the nuns of my school who terrify us both. I often imagine us in an empty house nestling in an overgrown garden. I have seen it in Sussex where I am often sent. I will paint it and repair it and make it very welcoming. We will live there together, my mother and I, in this secret house where she will be happy at last and talk to me and explain who she truly is.

Hardly anyone ever calls my mother Marie-Antoinette, which is her real name. They call her Poum instead. When she was a small child, she sat on the top step and went down the stairs on her bottom, saying 'poum, poum, poum'. From then on Poum is the name her family gave her and she answers to no other. I am the only person in the world who doesn't use either name. From the start our relationship lives on rarefied air.

'Is the lady coming to see us today?' I ask Sylvia before Poum swarms into our bedroom in a flutter of wings and words. Sylvia has looked after me since I was two years old, and when we are not in Sussex with the Lees, her parents, whom I call Mummy Joyce and Daddy John, we are back in my mother's apartment in Paris. Sylvia is eighteen when she first takes me on. She is very big and quiet. She has passed exams to look after children. My mother, who has never sat an exam in her life, consults her like a doctor or a child whisperer, and leaves me entirely in her capable hands. There are several other people on my case before that but I can't remember them. The last one is a pretty Irish girl who stays a year. She likes to drink and party and leaves me alone without notice for nights on end. My parents are quite desperate when she leaves because

she's such a sunny personality. They miss her. 'Sylvia is less fun, but more reliable,' they reason sadly.

To me, it is my parents' quarter that is not much fun. It is staid and residential and seems to say: *Only grown-ups live here*. The grey buildings have been standing there forever behind their united front. There are hardly any children. If I see a child I fantasise about him or her for weeks. The rare ones in our street are whisked inside, as if meeting another child could be contagious.

When Marie-Antoinette comes into our room, she pinches my cheek and covers my face with pecks. I am a slippery parcel. Her nails dig into my arms. Then suddenly she's gone and Sylvia and I are left looking at each other. Marie-Antoinette's presence is like putting the music on too loud or turning on too many lights at the same time. It takes us a while to catch our breath again. I know she is my mother, but at that time 'mother' is just a word.

I try to map her out, but it is only when I go out on a limb that she appears out of the mist in which she surrounds herself. Once she tells me she has dreamt of flowers and leaves locked in plexiglass – living things forever beautiful, unchanging. I am only a child, but it feels like a nightmare to me. How can they breathe? Yet something in my heart wonders if she isn't one of those beautiful, unchanging leaves or flowers that have to stay apart, separate and untouchable, in order to survive. I never know when Poum will share these isolated thoughts with me, like bits of morse code, even if the rest of the message is eaten by the wind and the hoarse cries of gulls. Our intimacy is about distant things, about the moon, dreams or *The Odyssey*, of which she knows whole swathes by heart. As I grow older, she will sometimes glance at me across a crowded room or even just blink when someone says something frightening or sad. These subtle acknowledgments of a mysterious, common understanding are rare, but I remember them like messages from outer space.

Poum is not from outer space. She is part Russian, with a Russian great-grandmother, and the rest of her is Old Europe with a Spanish

father and a French mother. She behaves like a memory long before I try to remember her. Maybe she knows her whole being can fall apart at any minute, and that all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put her together again. Maybe her puzzle needs to be enclosed in order for her to stay whole. I always imagine she is busy keeping the bits of herself in the boxes she collects. A tiny ivory one with its minute lock and key, a heavy pewter one, an ebony one strapped like a chest, a round silver one with a crown, a copper one with a white powdery lining – empty boxes that she pats, opens and closes. She seems to be begging, like Pandora, for everything to return to its safe place. These boxes feel magical to me. I wonder why they are always empty. I never see her put anything inside them. I am not allowed to touch them; nor is my father. He is too clumsy, she says. In fact, they are both clumsy. My father, Alexandre, is clumsy like an elephant, while Marie-Antoinette is clumsy like a bird. She drops, spills and breaks things and exclaims several times a day: 'All I wished to avoid has happened!' However, when she touches her boxes, her fingers have eyes that know where to go, seeing their way lightly and cleverly. My father and I both watch her when she moves her boxes and hold our breath as if something were going to happen.

When I am suddenly away from my parents, they are the fairytale I tell myself every day to believe in. People whisper about them as if they aren't quite true, just like Father Christmas and Little Red Riding Hood. People love to explain that no one lives at the North Pole, it's much too cold, and no, Little Red Riding Hood is not a real little girl and there aren't any wolves left in Sussex. I am left with Sylvia's parents, Daddy John and his wife, Mummy Joyce, for months on end in their little house that is nowhere near outer space but in Bognor Regis, Sussex, in the south of England, by the sea. That is where the abandoned house with the overgrown garden is – just down the road from them. I even secretly borrow a pot of paint and a paintbrush from Daddy John's shed to paint it white. I go there to do my work whenever I can. They think I am playing in the field.

For John Lee, my parents have too much money, money that my father earns swiftly and loses just as swiftly. My parents are casual about material things, which makes them *look* rich even when they are finding it hard to pay the bills. It gives them an irresponsible, childlike aura. They are not wholly convincing. Their enthusiastic voices soar in the Lees' little English cottage and are soon confused with the exhaust pipe of their car driving away. The Lees and I are left to carry on with our day. Once, on a whiff of my parents' impending arrival, I crouch a whole afternoon on the narrow ledge of the Lee's front porch from where I can see far down the road. I wait until the sun dies in the grass and I am called in for bedtime – but they don't come.

'I wouldn't like to be in that woman's place for all the money in the world,' says Daddy John. The comment makes me shiver; the words ripple with mysterious meaning. Is my mother from *another place*, from where no money can get her back? There is a premonition of a truth I can't fathom in those ominous words, something deeply desolate that describes 'the lady', as I first call my mother. I am always hearing comments about her. Some are cruel, especially her own family's. They believe I can't understand anything because of my English accent. When they say, 'Let's go back to the "circus" and drop the "child" back,' they mean the rue du Cirque, the street where my parents live, and they mean me.

I know I appeared in my mother's existence ten years into her shared life with my father. She thought she was barren, until she found she had a problem adjusting her skirt. 'Ouch, ouch, I must have gained some weight.' A friend advised her to go to a doctor. When she eventually did, she discovered she was six months pregnant. 'You were a shock,' she tells me.

And so I gradually realise that the lady is my mother. I discover things about her as I go. Marie-Antoinette was brought up in the south of France near a town lazing with its ruins in the sun, called Arles. There's a strange atmosphere in Arles. It seems desolate, extremely old, yet still brimming with pagan life. A wide, strong and furious river, called the

Rhône, stills its flow as it crawls past the town.

The Romans haven't left Arles, their grip hasn't loosened on the arenas, on the giant limbs of broken columns where the sun turns everything to old gold and the gladiators' blood is still drying on the sand. My father, Alexandre, adds this last touch, piloting Poum's elbow through sandy lanes and cobbled streets. In their ambling conversation, he throws his hand out as if feeding the birds and Poum nods, picking her way on her *talons compensés* (wedge-heeled shoes). They both love history and cap each other's quotes about battles, rivalries and lost kingdoms, but my father is the storyteller.

Alexandre is fifteen years older than Marie-Antoinette. He wakes at dawn and goes out to walk bare-headed in the sun. He returns grinning to her bedside, devouring a large breakfast as she sips her coffee in bed. I can chart every minute of their day. The patterns of eccentrics are often rigid. My parents have many idiosyncrasies and any new ones become instant habits. Theirs is a disciplined madness.

Marie-Antoinette loves places like others love people. She talks of Provence, where she was brought up, with tears in her eyes. It's a leitmotiv, ingrained in the echoes of her voice, in the sound of her steps, even in her rare kisses. One day my father makes one of his sudden decisions and drives her there, all the way from Paris. They return slightly deflated, and walk into our bedroom as if to check that we're still there. Alexandre wanted to bring her to the *Mas Blanc*, the place her parents 'lost' (she never says 'sold') just before World War II. Until she was eighteen she lived there with them and her brother and two sisters. Then, for unknown reasons, they had to leave. Nothing was explained at that time. She was brought to Paris. From seeing the gardener rake the coat of arms into the gravel every morning, she went to secretarial work, running after distant relations with a notepad – on the receiving end of family charity. She lived in fear of displeasing, possessed by the dream of shining in her parents' eyes, as the saviour of their fortunes. Marie-Antoinette was the family's breadwinner while her sisters danced at balls. All this information comes to me from conversations that seem

to percolate, dribble and ooze from the wallpaper, from doorways or staircases, and on this night even directly from my father.

He comes again late into our room in the dark. Sylvia is listening to the BBC in the kitchen. He takes my hand with a sigh. His words explain it all in a rush, but I see their venture, rather than hear it. I could have been in the back of the car. Something in me drinks in their bewilderment, making it even more familiar than my own ...

Tiny gravel crunches under the tyres of his *Peugeot*. Pencil pines grow against the facade. An enormous tree stands frighteningly alone in the enormous courtyard. The big house looks sad, shuttered, withdrawn into the past. Her bankrupt father 'lost' it long ago, when he 'lost' everything, just before the war. (Euphemisms are my mother's currency, or maybe they are just words that hurt less. As for objects, they are never lost; they 'go away', as if they have a mind of their own.)

Poum has no idea if the people who bought it then are still living there. It's just as well they're not at home; my parents are not supposed to be there. This is private property. My father thought their trespassing would be an added perk for my mother, who loves disobeying the law. But it seems to bother her today.

'What if someone is sitting behind those shutters, looking at us?' she mutters in an unexpectedly scared voice. Regardless of this risk, he walks round to help her out of the car. She always waits for him to open the car door.

She sets foot on the gravel and walks thoughtfully for a few steps. She seems curiously detached and silent. He doesn't understand the look on her face. Does the feast of memories presented to her make her recoil? Suddenly, he knows that the whole expedition was a bad idea. He has stepped into forbidden territory. He helps her back into the car, though she needs no help. She is small, supple, and walks with a nervous bird-like step. As they drive away, she is uncharacteristically silent. The tap of the past, usually fully turned on, is tightly closed and doesn't loosen until they get back onto the Arles road. She starts making small remarks on the countryside and the flow of her conversation bubbles

again with its usual references to long ago. He'll never know what froze her like this. He can only imagine that the memories of the Mas Blanc were not as nice as she had schooled herself to recall. Did some truth rush up at her when she saw the lonely tree and felt the gravel under her soles?

They drive on to the ruins at Les Baux-de-Provence and she excitedly climbs on the moonlike slabs of stone. There, as in Arles, her energy returns. It always returns near Roman ruins. It is the same in Sussex, when she and my father visit the Roman villas. She sits on vestiges of the past and looks safe at last, even carefree, and younger. The lady in her inevitable heels, pearls, Hermès scarf, skirt and cashmere twin-set vanishes. She looks like Poum, not a mother, not a lady, not anything but herself. I love her like that and I stare and wait. My father sucks at a piece of grass and glances at her out of the corner of his eye. In those moments, she is not a part of his dominion.

The heat, the dryness, the dust, the baked sidewalks, the silent afternoons of Arles have cut a groove into my mother. She turns towards any reminder of them like a sunflower to the sun. Arles's sirens call her backwards. She is a child of the past. Nothing of the past is strange to her; only the present is bewildering. Her other-worldliness seems to come from precise spots on this earth. Then why, when brought back to them at last, does her natural enthusiasm fail her?

Why does she seem to fear what she professes to love?