

Casseurs

Margaret Fraser

I remember the first time that I heard the word translated into simple, logical English, coming from my mother's mouth and landing perfectly in my gut: rioters. She said she'd heard it on the news. "They aren't rioters," I told her, "they're *casseurs*."

"So what do they do?"

"Break things."

"So they riot," she said.

"No, there's more to it, I've felt it, there's something in the air here, something is coming. I explain it to other Anglophones like this: a rioter is and can only

ever be part of a riot but a casseur, well, a casseur is part of a manif, part of the physical manifestation of something."

"But what?"

"It's difficult to explain," I told her, "let alone translate."

I was walking in a *manif* one night through downtown Montreal, when all of a sudden the crowd started to hiss. A *casseur*. They surrounded him. He was pushed out of view, denied the little safety that our sheer size granted us, and the SPVM descended upon him. There was no cheer, no pride in having rooted the "evils of violence" out from among us. Something else was going on. Something I couldn't quite put my finger on. There was a time when I was among those who said "I am with the movement, but against the violence." But that night and for the

many nights that followed, the moral absolutes just didn't hold. After all, how else can we explain the violence of those who'd sworn to protect us? Or Bill 78? Or the fee hike for that matter? It seemed both sides were redefining right and wrong daily.

But then-Premier Charest and Education Minister Beauchamp still brought the issue of "violence" into the debates, as if they had the elusive moral high ground. We all knew what it was: an excuse not to negotiate. I remember hearing Beauchamp further denounce the "violence" on the radio and thinking: violent or not, we have been hundreds of thousands in the streets. Violent or not, we represent deep political unrest. Violent or not, we have the right to meaningful participation in our own government. And yet we have been ignored, been discounted, been marginalized. I wanted to scream. If you refuse to hear us, to see us even, then what do we have left if not violence? How else can we defend our

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children's futures? And yet I knew deep in my heart that eventually I too would denounce violence, just like they wanted ...

When we reach the understanding that, despite what our mothers told us, words aren't always enough, that it isn't as simple as right and wrong; that our words, our dreams can be turned against us all too easily; when we understand all of that, what, then, is a casseur? A human. Someone with hopes and dreams and frustrations, who has loved, who has made mistakes, who, like many of us, felt something building inside of them that brought them out into the street but who dared to express it physically and saw the world reduce them to that single act, as if it could be isolated from the rest of them, or from the rest of us for that matter.

Why, then, if words have such limits, did I dedicate so much time over so many months to translating them? Why was it so important for my mother to understand the complexity of *casseur*? Because when our own government tried to silence us with Bill 78, the linguistic barrier was on Charest's side and I was not. Once it was clear he wouldn't listen or cave under our pressure alone, increasing access to the narratives of and about the movement to Anglophones in Québec, Canada and internationally could only help. I think the same would be true for any movement. So, while we'd never be able to translate the space between languages, we had to try for the same reason we had to protest night after night, because a better future doesn't build itself. And that's something that everyone, regardless of language, can understand.