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Puzzle by Viviane Mellerio-Grasser

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Madeleine McDonald
Puzzle

A little piece of cardboard
With gentle curves and deep hollows
Yet its appealing colours
Are no more than fabricated conceits
Alone, buffeted by time
How to give our search meaning
If not by giving concrete shape to
This glimpse that makes no sense

*Puzzle, puzzle indeed
To our wishes pay heed*

In the wide whirlpool of ideas
In the name of peoples and freedoms
Let us stop for a moment
And make use of our differences
Face to face
Let's open up
Using each other's knowledge
To aim for a magical experience

*Puzzle, puzzle indeed
To our wishes pay heed*

Viviane Mellerio-Grasser
Puzzle

Once our hollows and curves
Have fitted together, piece by piece
Hesitantly, accurately
The wedding time will come
Then, gently, little by little,
As the image is revealed
Our dazzled eyes would comprehend
...the Truth

*Puzzle, puzzle, be our guide
To fitting together side by side*

A little piece of cardboard which,
Having learned to forgive
With eyes wide open,
Compassionate yet without weakness,
Has fulfilled its side of the bargain
By breathing life into this substratum
Much love and much humanity
Make darkness lighten and retreat

*Puzzle, puzzle, you are nothing more
Than a stage on the road to our destiny*

Commentary

Viviane Mellerio-Grasser, who signs her poems Vyane, lives in France. Her poems are snapshots of love and life, and a reflection on life's journeys. She has the ability to convey wonderment and awe, like a child discovering the world, enriched by the forbearance of a woman who has known bliss and sorrow, contentment and disappointment, privilege and adversity, and whose faith in human nature runs deep.

Her poem *Puzzle* was awarded the *Plume d'Or* (Gold Pen) prize in 2009 by the literary association *La Plume Colmarienne*, based in Colmar, the second city of Alsace, France. Like the judges, I enjoyed the clever, playful hook of the first line that draws readers in to a broad appeal for respect and tolerance.

Elsewhere, Mellerio-Grasser has spoken of the importance of her religious faith. She holds the view that each and every human being on this earth is interconnected, and part of an immense chain. In this poem, instead of links in a chain, she uses the image of jigsaw pieces slotting together. Only once all pieces fit together perfectly, and the puzzle is complete, would the image of Divine Truth become visible (her use of the conditional tense is deliberate).

The author sets herself the challenge of exploring this transcendent concept within a structured framework. Even the zigzag layout is a playful echo of the title. Playing with rhyme, Mellerio-Grasser nevertheless respects its rules, and her native French offers her an abundance of possibilities.

In my translation, I abandoned any idea of replicating the pattern and rhythm of her quatrains and couplets. Instead, with due humility, I attempted to capture the essence of this short poem.

Initially, I used the word “jigsaw” for the title and in the body of the text, inspired by the literal image of a piece of cardboard. However, the author preferred “puzzle,” referring both to a jigsaw puzzle and to the immense puzzle of a human being.

I translated *délicatement* as “hesitantly,” instead of “delicately,” imagining both the way one slots a jigsaw into place, and the way human beings get to know each other.

The reader is made to stop and think as the author jumps between the third person and the first person, between “its/his/her” and “our,” even addressing the puzzle as “you” in some lines. The author was insistent that she wanted *sa/son* translated as “his” in most lines because the jigsaw piece stands for a human being. Yet this created problems because of the distinction in English between “his,” “her,” and “its.” I therefore left “its” in the first and last verse, and amalgamated “his/her” and “our” into “our” throughout, to echo the poem’s spirit of inclusiveness.

The rhyming couplets, which enhance the rhythm of the poem, offered a particular challenge. In my attempts to find a rhyming structure that worked in English, I played with ever looser interpretations of meaning. For the repetition of *vérité / clé*, the author herself suggested “Puzzle, puzzle in fact, To his wishes please act.” So the final version became “Puzzle, puzzle indeed, To our wishes pay heed.” For *guider / ajuster*, I flirted with “show us the way / day by day” before deciding on “guide / side by side” Not for want of trying, I had to give up on finding an English rhyme to stand for *rien* and *destin*, although I contemplated pairing “yourself so tiny” and “destiny.”

I thank the author for her generous collaboration. Any shortcomings in the translation are mine.

Mellerio-Grasser’s collection, *Tranches de Vie (Slices of Life)* is published by Le Cercle du Rhin International.