



# Raw Milk

## Steve Poutré

Excerpt translated by  
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FINALIST  
Prix Senghor du premier roman francophone  
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"This novel proves itself to be simultaneously, instructive, carnal and poetic, and dwells with us a long time."

*Le Journal de Québec*



### STEVE POUTRÉ

**Steve Poutré** was born in 1979. He grew up on a dairy farm, located in Saint-Ignace-de-Stanbridge, before moving to Montreal to begin a career as a graphic designer. After more than twenty years

spent formatting the words of others, he has now chosen to share his own. *Lait cru* is his first novel. Today, Steve lives and writes in Saint-Mathias-sur-Richelieu, where he has rediscovered his horizons and his roots.

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### Synopsis

The North American farm is not picturesque or peaceful. It is haunted by the dead, by ghost stories and family secrets, by stillborn chicks trapped inside their shell. Invisible cattle roam here, worn down by the endless grind of feeding the nation.

Among the shadows, a young boy walks between his shy elder brother and his wild younger brother, on the thin line between the fields and the woods. He eventually crosses the border, entering a strange land where eye floaters, tinnitus, and nightmares rule and where his fingerprints are lost. His body frozen, his mind ablaze, he finds himself in a psychiatric ward. But even from his hospital bed, he keeps wandering the farm grounds, looking for what is not yet lost.

*Lait cru* injects a healthy dose of Gothic into the old rural landscape. Appealing to both the senses and the heart, Steve Poutré's writing unearths skeletons from the fertile soil and demons from the mind. This startling first novel questions the servitude that binds humans and animals together in a twisted and tender way. A glass of raw milk to be drunk in one gulp.

### Black

I came in with the last storm. Two weeks, two months, I don't know. It's still winter.

When I clench my fists, the heat pounds through my veins like a drum. I unclench my palms and the music keeps on going. Pins and needles under my fingernails take me back to when they saved me.

The doctors caught my frostbite just in time. Another hour out in the forest and I'd have lost my fingertips, above the top knuckle. My skin is a more reassuring colour now, purples and pinks that don't stray too far into black.

Black. I need the walls of this room painted black.

### Milking time

My arms begin to move and my hands on the sheets are seized by the chill in this room. I put them back between my thighs a moment.

*How are we doing this morning?* They brush past me and flank me, looking in the same direction as me. Different scents, different types. Their bright eyes guide me. They punch gently down on the openings of sentences.

I write my first few words. It takes a concerted effort, and I can't properly dig in. My new life is short-lived. That women are taking an interest in my writings is intoxicating, and I let these ideas float free for a while.

*We'll come back a little later.* The satisfied guardians are off on their rounds. The moment they leave, I understand that I've let myself drift off too far.

I dream of a violent immersion, hundreds of hooves clobbering the ground. It's milking time.

I don't know what it is exactly, the yellow liquid my uncle adds to scalding water. Probably some cheap degreaser. Unthinkingly, I dip scraps of cloth into this concoction that slowly turns my child's hands into wrinkled old-man fists. At first, it's too hot to even think about wringing out the rag before washing the first udder. I let the water run onto my oversized boots, sending haphazard rivulets down gutters flowing with tepid urine.

I love spending time with these animals. To the uninitiated, they seem forlorn. But to me they are peaceful, noble souls, steadfast and at home with their place in the world. Theirs is a calm, orderly resignation.

My father taught me the correct approach. Above all don't ever surprise them. Cows are very strong, could crush me to death if I got caught between them. You have to lay a firm and reassuring hand on their rump, right before you bend down to wash them. They are always receptive. We feed them as we hook them up to the milking machines.

The hardest part is when one just wants to lie down. Then we start getting behind. My father and uncles have gotten less patient with age. At first I stick to the old-fashioned kick, then resign myself to carrying a pitchfork. Poke and prod, draw blood if need be. A cow that won't get up is no use. I'll be watching cartoons the day I finally learn that pitchforks are made for heaving straw.

Dry dung patties are clumped in the aisles. They slow me down. My wheels manage to roll over these small hills, until they get bogged down in a heap that's just too fresh. Before long my cart of pails and heavy-duty hoses looks like a train car run off the track. *Gotta catch that train* we say when it's time to do our chores. A phrase pulled out every night after supper, *Gotta catch that train*.

Our family drinks what we somewhat stupidly call *cow's* milk, by which we mean *our* milk – raw, unfiltered, unpasteurized, nothing like what you find at the grocery store. We have an intimate connection to this liquid whose complex flavour leaves no doubt where it comes from. We draw whatever we need for our family straight from the big tank in the dairy.

I take this work that my father entrusted me seriously. Giving the udders a good scrub before milking keeps impurities to a minimum. Even just a few hayseeds at the bottom of the pail will mix in unnoticed with the white liquid without anyone noticing.

In this cowshed, a dusty speaker crackles out old hits for the herd of Holsteins. One of my uncles claims music makes the cows produce more milk. They're probably happiest ruminating to old yé-yé, César et les Romains and such, but I'm not convinced their happiness matters all that much.

## Excerpt

*Muck out before you go.* A hand passes me the big scraper, covered in enough crud to double its weight. I quickly shovel out the aisles of filth, and lay down a generous layer of straw to keep it clean.

Tonight, I've taken care to spread healthy amounts of excrement over my pants. In my mother's eyes, dirty clothes are a sign that you've worked hard. Proof that you're a man. I don't think my father notices the ploy. The smell of cattle on a farmer's body is like flour on the sleeves of a pastry chef's coat. It's not even technically *dirty* anymore. We just use the word for our barn clothes. *Put on your dirties. Get it from your dirty drawer.*

Before wrapping up, I pass my grandfather, walking slowly through the dairy, dragging a long broom behind him. I don't dare meet his gaze.

Outside, February is looking mean. There's nothing to temper the elements here, apart from the hundred cows bellowing in air warmed by the methane hissing from their orifices. More than enough to stay warm for the time it takes to milk them. It even gets to be too much toward the end, suffocating us. The feed dust scratches our lungs. The ammonia smell of their urine makes us lightheaded. Going out brings salvation, but it freezes our bodies. Often enough we forget our knit cap or gloves. Sometimes there's no clear distinction between our outerwear for school and stable. We don't want to take chances, so we freeze.

My father's busy miscommunicating with his brothers, and mine have found a thousand excuses not to come with us. So I set off alone. There are two possible routes: skirt the edge of the field behind my grandparents' house, or cut through it, like a carefree kid. Sometimes I'm a carefree kid.

I move forward over the cratered lunar ground, a land outside of time where the horizon is ever out of sight, even in broad daylight. The cows are already far behind, wishing me good night. Their lowing will stay with me a long time. They haunt my dreams.

The heat rises up off of my damp clothes, evaporating along with my courage. The air in my nostrils is so cold I can't make out even familiar scents. My strides grow hesitant. I'm supposed to be getting closer, but my home is less and less visible. The light from the few windows is on the wrong side, like a lighthouse that has stopped turning. My legs conspire with the darkness to fool me. I'm treading water. I'm trapped in total darkness, a minute presence in a vast pocket of emptiness. I regret taking this shortcut. A last bellow from the barn gives me my final bearing.

At first I think it's the noise of my footsteps over the crusty snow. I stop. The creaking grows more frequent, even when I stop moving. Stray cats, maybe. My fingers blindly comb the frozen surface, hoping to find warmth in a fur. The ground is covered in small bulges, frantic goose bumps about to burst. This field is mined.

A shudder grips the natty fibres of my shirt. I slam into the emptiness, twisting and shaking to try to regain composure. The tremors clash, turning into convulsions.

They're all around, at my feet. I can feel them climbing up my boots. That's when I realize that I'm fucked.