



RINCÓN DE  
TRADUCTORES

TRANSLATORS'  
CORNER

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TRADUCTORES



Volume 1  
Compilation 2019-2020

Edited by  
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RT/TC 009 (2020)  
ISSN: 2694-2801 (online) / 2694-281X (print)



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# Presentation

In September 2019, the *Observatory of the Spanish Language and Hispanic Cultures in the USA* launched the Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner, with the aim of fulfilling one of the objectives of this Instituto Cervantes research center at Harvard University, which, apart from examining the situation and evolution of the language and cultures from the various Spanish-speaking countries in relation to the multilingual and multicultural US environment, pursues to disseminate the literary and intellectual production originally created in Spanish. Translation becomes particularly relevant for this major aim of *the Observatorio* –as the center is commonly known at Harvard, for this dissemination can be done not only in the original language of those works but also in English translation.

Indeed, turning this production into the main language used in the US will help it reach a wider audience since, in translated form, it will not only be accessible to hispanists or English-speaking readers with a good command of Spanish –i.e. those who can read the original creations from the Spanish-speaking world, but also to those who have very little or no knowledge of this language but might nevertheless be interested in the literature and cultures associated with it. Moreover, given the status of English as today's lingua franca, the English translations of these Spanish-language originals will also bring these closer to readers with English as a second or foreign language, hopefully awakening an interest in Spanish and Hispanic literature and thought. This is indeed one of the main roles of translation: enabling a culture's production to reach beyond the borders formed by language differences, which it does in a very powerful way. As André Lefevere put it, “[translation] is potentially the most influential [type of rewriting] because it is able to project the image of an author and/or those works beyond the boundaries of their culture of origin” (1992: 9).

Now, the authors who are best appreciated by source-culture audiences and readers are not always those who eventually manage to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries, for the selection of works to be introduced in foreign lands through a translation process often meets cultural, artistic, historical, economic, political, etc. criteria pertaining to the target system. And their reception may also be significantly different at either end, so that those works which become well known in a target culture are not necessarily those which are most highly valued or popular in their country of origin. Intercultural communication is underpinned by the specific power relations and values of each cultural system, as David Katan has analysed in detail (2009, p. 91), and there are some “ ‘hidden’ and ‘unconscious’ factors [...] which determine how a text will be understood” when subjected to translation.

The Observatorio’s Rincón de Traductores/Translators’ Corner was launched with the purpose of opening the door of English-speaking contexts to (relatively brief) works from any author, any Hispanic country, any period or genre, which have been originally created, and published, in Spanish, and which a particular translator considers worthy of acquaintance and attention by English-speaking readers. The ‘selection process’ is therefore initiated by the translators themselves, who may belong to the source culture (a Spanish-speaking literary system) or to the receiving end, principally the United States –though not exclusively. This will hopefully favour the dissemination of works and authors which/who, for whatever reason –unconnected with their literary quality or appreciation in their countries of origin, have never been known beyond the Hispanic world.

The section has indeed been named ‘Rincón de Traductores/Translators’ corner’ focusing on these experts, who will, by their own initiative, render a work into English and submit their translation to the Observatorio’s consideration for publication, accompanying their proposal with a brief but useful introduction to the original work and author, helping readers contextualize the text. The translator’s bionote also has some space in the publication. We thus pay tribute to (literary) translators, who have played a pivotal role in the construction of cultures, substantially contributing to the mutual enrichment of linguistically diverse countries by helping their literary and intellectual productions break through the barriers that separate them. Peter Bush has expressed it eloquently: “Literary translators are involved at a keen point of cultural convergence because they translate those works which, for whatever reason, are selected for translation and which now exist where otherwise there would be silence” (1998/2001, p. 127). Apart from acknowledging their key role in suggesting works for translation themselves, Bush highlights their contribution to breaking nationalist canons, since “[a]s the creator of the new work in the target culture, the literary translator operates at the frontiers of language and culture, where identity is flux, irreducible to everyday nationalist tags”

(1998/2001, p. 128). –which is why Maria Tymoczko’s description of a translator as “an ethical agent of social change” (2003: 181) seems more than adequate.

Translators certainly produce change and cooperation through the social and cross-cultural interaction taking place in any process of translation, which is often a two-way journey, particularly in the literary sphere: works get translated and may influence authors in foreign lands, sometimes producing momentous changes in them, by introducing new styles, literary forms, topics, or fresh approaches, which will be absorbed by the new cultures and reshaped into works produced in their native tongues; these new creations will frequently in turn be rendered into the language which had first originated a particular literary pattern, themselves impacting on the works now produced in it. This explains and illustrates why “translated literature has been so influential in shaping the dynamics of discourse, communication and culture” (Lambert, 1998/2001, p. 133), actively participating in the negotiation and reinterpretations that texts are subject to in the various cultures, themselves always “in a constant state of flux” (Katan, 2009, p. 88).

This volume initiates a series of special issues which we intend to bring out annually, with a selection of the translations published online throughout the previous academic year. The translations compiled in this first, 2019-2020, volume are a good reflection of the variety of texts, authors, countries, genres and styles, that we would like the Rincón de Traductores/Translators’ Corner to be characterized by, as it includes English versions of texts from Colombia, Dominican Republic, Mexico and Spain, by eight different authors –José Alcántara Almánzar, Albalucía Ángel Marulanda, Guadalupe Dueñas, Federico García Lorca, Miguel Hernández, Marina Mayoral, José María Merino and Soledad Puértolas, who represent diverse periods, literary styles and genres.

The translators also show a variety of origins and professional backgrounds, as their bionotes reflect. And by naming the section ‘Rincón de *Traductores/Translators*’ corner’, we also acknowledge the fact that these are their own proposals: any of the originals which have been the source of the English texts presented here would have been conveyed through a (more or less) different translation had they been submitted by another translator, since there is never only one possible rendering of a source text – translation always being a (very complex) decision-making process, as Jiry Levy quite rightly once described it (1967). Translators not only resort to their expertise and creativity when making their decisions, but also put in their experiences, knowledge, readings, beliefs and ideology, regarding the source text they are translating as well as the target language, culture and receivers, inevitably leaving a trace in their target texts. A degree of subjectivity is therefore always present in the process, but this is true not just of the translation production but also of its reception, as “[the]

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new creation in turn becomes the basis for multiple readings and interpretations which will go beyond any intentions of either original author or translator” (Bush, 1998/2001, p. 129).

The Observatorio would like to thank the translators in this volume, who have helped us launch the section so successfully, for their rigorous work and generous contributions, as well as the original authors (or their estates and publishers) for granting their permission to have their works translated for publication in the Rincón the Traductores/Translators’ Corner. I also wish to express my deepest gratitude to all the people who encouraged me to go ahead with this initiative: I would particularly like to thank Prof. Diana Sorensen, Director of the Observatorio, for her trust and constant encouragement, Prof. Christopher Maurer, from Boston University, for so generously offering to send a translation of a text by García Lorca, which would start off the whole project, and for obtaining the permission of the Fundación Federico García Lorca and the Centro Federico García Lorca for the inclusion of those very special illustrations in his section. Warm thanks also go to Natalie Ramírez, graduate student from Harvard University, for her serious work and enthusiasm with this project throughout this initial year, when she collaborated as Research Assistant at the Observatorio. Finally, I would also like to show my appreciation to Andrea Arrangoiz-Arriola, undergraduate student from Wellesley College, who designed a beautiful cover for this special volume and another one for the regular issues of the Rincón the Traductores/Translators’ Corner during her internship with us last summer, and to Juan Manuel Arias, graduate student from Harvard University and current Research Assistant at the Observatorio, for his efficient collaboration in editing this volume, which will hopefully be followed by many more to come.

Prof. Marta Mateo Martínez de Bartolomé  
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# A Letter of Federico García Lorca to his Parents, 1935

*translated by* Christopher Maurer

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## INTRODUCTION

### Standing the political ground

The Madrid (1934) and Barcelona (1935) premieres of *Yerma* by the great Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) touched off controversies in both cities. In language nourished by traditional song and by surprising metaphor and peppered by what some considered “crude” references to sex, the work confronts a theme central to Lorca: absence, in this case the absent, unborn child. Lorca’s “Drama poético” was described in 1934-35 as contrary to Catholic visions of motherhood. His love of Cataluña—sparked by his friendship with Dalí and his long association with his leading lady, the Catalan actress, Margarita Xirgu, who was a close friend of Manuel Azaña—helped fuel attacks in the right-wing press and homophobic comments about Lorca’s sexuality fanned the flames. In this letter of October 7 or 8, 1935, less than a year before his assassination in Granada, he describes the situation to his parents.

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Christopher Maurer, Professor of Spanish at Boston University, has edited and translated works by Raúl Barrientos, Carlos Germán Belli, Salvador Dalí, Federico García Lorca, Jorge Guillén, Baltasar Gracián, Joan Margarit, Miguel de Unamuno, and others. He is the editor, with Andrew Anderson, of Lorca's complete letters. He teaches translation at Boston University and will be teaching in BU's new M.A. in Literary Translation.

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## A LETTER OF FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA TO HIS PARENTS, 1935

[Barcelona, October 7 or 8, 1935]

Dearest Mother and Father:

I got your letter and it made me very happy. Margarita [Xirgu] is no longer going to Italy because of the war,<sup>1</sup> and I will be leaving in three or four days to be with you and then go to Valencia for a couple of days for the premiere of *Yerma* and *Bodas de sangre*, which we are already rehearsing. Margarita will return later to Barcelona to do *Bodas de sangre* and *Rosita la Soltera*, whose premiere will be in Barcelona. She's going to invite all the Madrid critics so that in the press it will be as if the premiere had been there. At the end of January she'll leave for Mexico.

The success of *Yerma* in Barcelona has been *unique*. I don't remember this much enthusiasm even in Buenos Aires. The theater is packed and a seat costs six pesetas, an unheard of price in times like these. I am earning money, naturally, and I spend nothing since I live with Margarita. Yesterday I gave a poetry reading for all the workers' atheneums of Cataluña, and it was held in the teatro Barcelona.<sup>2</sup> There was a huge audience that filled the theater and later the whole Rambla de Cataluña

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: The second Italo-Ethiopian war. A month later, Lorca signed a letter, together with Antonio Machado, Fernando de los Ríos and other intellectuals, protesting the "violent and overwhelming [Italian] invasion." FGL, *Manifiestos, adhesiones y homenajes (1916-1936)*, ed. Rafael Inglada, Granada, Patronato Cultural Federico García Lorca de la Diputación de Granada, s.a., pp. 91-92.

<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: The poetry recital was given under the auspices of the Literature and Fine Arts section of the Ateneo Enciclopédico Popular the morning of October 6. See Andrew Anderson's note in FGL, *Epistolario completo*, eds. Andrew A. Anderson and Christopher Maurer, Madrid, Cátedra, 1997, p. 815.

was full of people listening over loud speakers, for the reading was broadcast. It was moving—the reception of the workers and the enthusiasm, good faith and deep affection they showed me. It was so very true, this contact of mine with the authentic people—the *pueblo*—that I got choked up and found it difficult to speak. It gave me a lump in my throat. They followed the poems with magnificent intuition, but when I read the “Ballad of the Civil Guard,” the whole theater rose to its feet with shouts of “Long live the poet of the people!” Afterwards, for more than an hour and a half I had to withstand a parade of people shaking my hand: old working-class women, children, students, servants. It was the most beautiful event I’ve had in my entire life. Every day I find more impossible [illegible] the cold, useless people who’ve been able to support the odious present-day theater, and who climb into their cars and shut the door with a certain world-weariness.

I am happy and wish you had seen all that.

Tomorrow I give a reading and commentary on the *Gypsy Ballads* at the University, organized by the students. And not a single seat is available.<sup>3</sup>

The separatism of Cataluña is a myth, and one way they prove that they are authentic Spaniards are these great proofs of ‘españolismo’ they offer to me, since I’m so representative of Spain.

To be sure, the right wing will use all this to keep up their campaign against me and against Margarita, but it doesn’t matter. It’s almost better that they do so, and that people know once and for all where we stand. One thing for sure: in Spain today one cannot be neutral.

A big hug for everyone. And kisses. You know how much you are loved by your son

FEDERICO

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<sup>3</sup> Translator’s note: As Anderson points out, Lorca’s use of “today” and “tomorrow” is a bit inexact. On October 9 he gave the reading at the Residencia de Estudiantes, Barcelona, an event organized by the Escuela de Enfermeras de la Generalitat de Cataluña and the Instituto de Acción Social Universitaria y Escolar de Cataluña.

## ILLUSTRATIONS<sup>4</sup>

Insistimos pedros: Recibi vuestro carta y me podria mucha alegria.  
 Me gusta ya vivir a Italia por causa de la guerra y yo me ir de tres o cuatro  
 dias para estar un mes y de pueris del dia a Valencia al sistema de guerra y  
 de Babel de tiempo y yo estareis avanzando. Me gusta luego volver otra  
 vez a Barcelona para poder Babel de tiempo y estar en Paris la ultima vez  
 antes de ir a Barcelona y ~~se~~ ~~volver~~ ~~invertido~~ por la vez por todas los  
 amigos de Madrid para no olvidar la guerra sea como si se hubiera terminado  
 aqui. A fin de Enero de la semana a Mexico.  
 El epito de la guerra en Barcelona ha sido unico. Yo no recuerdo entusiasmo  
 igual ni en Buenos Aires. El teatro esta de hecho en bote y la batalla entre  
 ellos pesa, pero insolito ante tiempos. Yo gano cuando natural y  
 no punto punto que vivo con Mirante. Ayer de una lectura de vivos  
 para todos los Ateneos de Barcelona y se celebran el teatro de todos  
 de Cataluña habia una clase de publico no oia en alto voces pero el  
 acto se realizo. Fue una vez anunciado al momento de los actos  
 el entusiasmo la buena fe y el camino curioso que me demostraron.  
 Fue una vez tan verdadera este contacto mio con el pueblo catalan  
 que me emocioné hasta el punto que me costó mucho trabajo seguir  
 a hablar por tener un miedo en la garganta. Con una intencion de seguir  
 hablando los poemas pero cuando di el Romance de la guerra civil  
 se pudo ver todo el teatro quitando viva el teatro del pueblo! Despues  
 tuve que sentirme mas de hora y media un desfilé de gente donde la mano  
 vicia abas, susurros, miradas aturdidas momentales. En el acto me hurren  
 por lo que le toque en mi vida. Cada dia se me hace mas imposible

acercarme a la parte que me interesa mi carta y presento el ocioso teatro  
 actual y vivo un acto durante los momentos de los autos morales.  
 Estoy contento y quisiera que vosotros hubierais visto aquello.  
 Merece una lectura comentada del Romance en la Universidad organizo  
 por los estudiantes. Ya me pedia una invitacion.  
 El separatismo de Cataluña es un mito y una demostracion de que no  
 autenticos españoles son ante muchos grandes de separacion que me dan  
 ya que yo soy tan representativo de España.  
 Como es me los derechos toman todos estos cosas para seguir en mi  
 campo contra mi y contra Mirante pero no importa. Es con  
 conciencia por lo que yo que se separa una vez los campos que  
 pensamos. Desde luego (Prof. E.) que no se puede ser neutral.  
 Muchos abrazos a todos. Bien y ya sabéis como yo soy vuestro hijo

Federico

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Facsimile of the letter. Centro Federico García Lorca, Archivo de la Fundación Federico García Lorca

<sup>4</sup> Translator's note: All images courtesy of Centro Federico García Lorca and Archivo de la Fundación Federico García Lorca, Granada. The flyer and photos below are from the exhibition and catalogue *Jardín deshecho: Lorca y el amor*, curated by C. Maurer, Centro Federico García Lorca, Granada.



*Centro Federico García Lorca  
 Archivo de la Fundación Federico García Lorca*

From a flyer advertising the premiere of *Yerma* in Barcelona, written perhaps by its director, Cipriano Rivas Cherif: “The Artistic Management is pleased to notify whoever may be clumsily drawn by the misleading discussion which arose with respect to the premiere of *Yerma* in Madrid, that this is not one of those comedies which are declared ‘unfit for young ladies’. On the contrary, it is a drama whose poetic crudeness is tempered by the almost violently rigorous morality of its sincerity.”

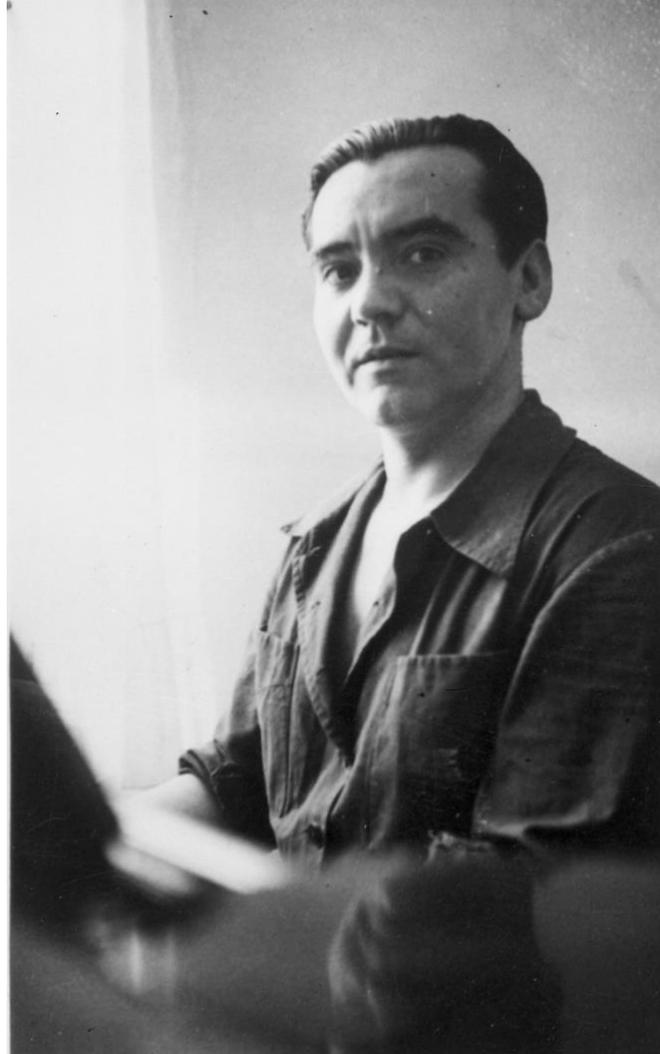
*Yerma* had drawn attacks in the right-wing press and critical letters. One of the letters criticizes the playwright for the supposed crudity of referring to coitus with the verb  *cubrir*  (*Yerma* in Act III: “cuando mi marido me cubre, cumple con su deber” (“When my husband covers me he does his duty.”)) Asked in an interview about the supposed “crudeness” of his work, the poet declared: “There is nothing of the sort. Unless you want to call ‘crude’ transplanting [onto the stage] life the way it is. The people who are afraid of my theatrical reality are Pharisees who are not frightened by that reality in their own lives. [...] I use [these words] because they come out that way. But besides, one of the things I’m trying to do in my theater is just that—to frighten and scare people a bit. I’m

confident and happy to cause scandal. I want to provoke revulsion and see whether the contemporary theater will vomit up everything that's bad about it.” (FGL, *Palabra de Lorca. Declaraciones y entrevistas completas*, ed. Rafael Inglada con la colaboración de Víctor Fernández, Barcelona, Malpaso, 2019, p. 432.)



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Act 3 of *Yerma*, hermitage scene  
*Centro Federico García Lorca, Archivo de la Fundación Federico García Lorca*



Federico at the piano, 1935. Photo taken by Eduardo Blanco-Amor  
*Centro Federico García Lorca, Archivo de la Fundación Federico García Lorca*

# “In the Parks, at Dusk” *and* “I Only Think of You”

*by* Marina Mayoral

*translated by* María Socorro Suárez Lafuente

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## INTRODUCTION

These two short stories, by Marina Mayoral, are part of a collection compiled in the book *Recuerda, cuerpo* [*Remember, body*], Editorial Alfaguara, Madrid, 1998. Editorial Raspabook (from Murcia, Spain) has recently published the book again in 2017. The title is taken from a poem by Konstantino Kavafis in which the Greek poet talks about love, feeling and desire as embodied in the physical memory of the body that has experienced love. All those affects are elegantly re-enacted by Mayoral in her stories with a touch of nostalgia and humour, while inadvertently inscribing the situation of Spanish women in the 1950s with a few masterstrokes.

Marina Mayoral who writes in Spanish and in Galician, is, so far, the author of eighteen novels, several collections of stories and also narratives for young adults. Some of her novels are: *El reloj de la torre*, *Dar la vida y el alma*, *Recóndita armonía*, *Bajo el magnolio* and *Querida amiga*. One of her novels for young readers, *Tristes armas*, has recently seen its 30<sup>th</sup> edition, and has been translated into English as *Sad Weapons*. Some of her fiction has been translated into Italian, German, Polish, Portuguese and Chinese. Mayoral has been awarded several literary prizes throughout her career and, very recently, the ‘Voz de Libertad’ [Voice of Freedom] Prize given by Pen Club Galicia. She was Professor of Spanish Literature at Universidad Complutense of Madrid till she retired, and her essays on Rosalía de Castro, Emilia Pardo Bazán, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda and Carolina Coronado are widely known as fundamental works of research on classic female writers in Spanish. She is and has been, for several years now, a reputed columnist for several national newspapers. Her literary and critical work can be followed on her official webpage: [www.marinamayoral.es](http://www.marinamayoral.es).

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## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

María Socorro Suárez Lafuente is Professor of Literature at the University of Oviedo, Spain. Her interests lie in the field of Contemporary Literature, both in English and Spanish, in Feminism, Postcolonial Theory and the development of the Faust theme. She has published extensively on those fields, both in English and Spanish, has been co-editor of several books and started several editorial lines in Feminist Studies, Postcolonial Writers and Bilingual Chapbooks in Contemporary Literatures. She was President of the Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies and of the Spanish Association of University Women, and is Fellow of the English Association. She is founding member of the ESSE Gender Studies Network and the European Network of Dialogue Process Facilitators.

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## IN THE PARKS, AT DUSK

The President of the Catholic Ladies Association has asked me to write my autobiography. They want to publish it in a small, neat edition, to be distributed among the members of the Association to serve as a model for their daughters in these times of moral decay. The City Council will fund the project—they have passed the proposal unanimously. I am not surprised: almost all members were once in my classes and have fond memories of their old teacher. As I understand it, it will be an homage to my many years of dedication to children and an acknowledgment of my work and merits.

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I've thanked the President for the Ladies' initiative and the Council for its generosity, but I made them see the difficulties of the project, the money and the work involved and the small benefit to be derived from them. Who will be interested in the life of a common schoolteacher? And, above all, who will benefit from it?

I have very little to say about my early years. I was a good girl and a serious young woman. My brothers married and left with their wives. Nobody said it explicitly, but it was understood that I would take care of Father and Mother, and Aunt Sabina, who had no means. Not that we were rich, but my father had a moderate pension and we owned the house, which my mother had inherited. Add to that my school teaching salary and we lived easily, although modestly.

When I turned thirty I realized I was a spinster. I wasn't any uglier or more unfriendly than the other young women in the village that did get married. I think that I was just unlucky. The war broke out when I was seventeen, and by the time it ended there were very few men and a lot of women to choose from. I was timid and somehow quiet; I was never saucy, and I believe that was why no man in the village ever noticed me.

Since my job as a school-teacher left me a lot of spare time and my parents could still take care of themselves, I decided to study languages: French first, and then English, Italian, German... Knowing foreign languages was fundamental to my life and helped me to become a fully realized woman and human being.

When I was thirty-three, an age at which so many great men ended their lives, I decided to travel to France on my own, to Paris. I could read French fluently, and I was looking forward to practising my speaking skills and getting to know a city that seemed to me then the centre of the world.

In Paris, a man kissed me for the first time in my life. It was a strange and distracting experience—*bouleversante*, I thought in my incipient French—but which I cannot recall clearly in spite of the deep trace it left in my spirit.

I saw the man in a café, in the Latin Quarter. I realized he was watching me, and I reddened up to my ears. I pretended to be absorbed in the map of the city, but he came up to my table and offered to be my guide. I hadn't had many opportunities to talk, due to my shyness, so I accepted. We went out of the café together and strolled along the Seine towards the Vert-Galant. Once there, he put his arm around my shoulders while he told me some story about a Templar monk who had been burnt alive. I wasn't listening to his words; I could only hear the mad thumping of my heart. When he pushed me against a bush and then to the ground I got frightened. It was all like a dream. I don't know if it was my tears, or if it was actually hazy, but I remember everything happening in a thick grey fog, everything lonely and silent; I could only hear his breathing, and then my steps running away. I went back to the hotel, concealing as best as I could my torn nylons, dishevelled hair and the blood stains on my clothes. I picked up my luggage and went back to my village immediately.

When I calmed down I realized I had liked it. I remembered with a thrilling pleasure the taste of his mouth, his breath, his violent embrace, and, above all, his yielding. Yes, his yielding: the pressure of his arms and his body against mine, and then his laxity, his sweet abandoning. It was a mixed feeling, exciting and startling, which disturbed my peaceful existence as a schoolteacher in a village with less than 10,000 inhabitants. I knew I had to feel that again, that life was grey and meaningless if I could not season it, lighten it up, with that pleasure that captivated and transported me to a world I had only glimpsed, but which I could not renounce.

It wasn't an easy step to take. It took me a while to decide to travel again. At the beginning I was satisfied with the mere evocation of what had happened, but after a few months I felt the imperious need to live that experience again.

I went back to Paris, because, with the pretext of practising the language, I could leave my parents and my aunt for a few days with no explanation.

I began to enjoy myself and would get excited already while preparing for the trip, although I was assaulted with fears of not being able to complete it. What if the first time had been mere chance? Maybe no man would ever look at me again with eyes of desire, or pounce on me like a hungry beast. But my fears proved unfounded. I was lucky, or maybe away from the village I

developed a dark instinct, a subtle attractiveness that the routine of my job and my timidity annulled while I was at home.

I must say, false modesty aside, that I never had trouble attracting a man during my trips, and I could even allow myself to choose. I realized very soon that to reach the climax of pleasure, total and complete satisfaction, I had to do it with a man of special characteristics. He had to be the type considered more virile, hefty, well-muscled, with a close beard and abundant corporal hair, strong odour and, above all, strong impulses. I felt an indescribable pleasure in being pressed, squeezed, flattened by a powerful body, knowing that it would yield in the end, that it would conform to my own body, and I would drink his breath while he languished in my arms on the wet grass... Because I liked doing it in parks and at dusk. I think that was a small perversion, a mania I kept from that first experience in the Vert-Galant. I can't always have it that way, but when I can, my pleasure is perfect, absolute, and immeasurable.

After the second time, I applied myself to learning English, and after six months I felt ready to make a trip to London. Later it was Rome, then Berlin, Cologne... always to big cities and always after studying the appropriate language.

Those trips not only provided me with all the pleasure I enjoyed in my life, but they allowed me to help others. My school children learnt with me the rudiments of languages that enabled them to stand out in their adult jobs, or, in any case, to emigrate in better conditions. Their contribution to my homage proves that they appreciate what I did for them. And the same can be said for the patience and love with which I attended my parents in their long infirmities and my aunt Sabina in her impatient and debilitated old age. My own sisters-in-law, ashamed of my bearing the whole weight of the family, encouraged me to go on those trips, from which I always came back with renewed vigour.

I am not saying this as an excuse. I know that what I did could seem morally censurable, but this is something between God and myself, and I will not discuss it with anybody else. The only person to whom I partly revealed that need of mine to possess a man from time to time was my confessor, Don Luis, a pure soul, a real saint, who understood that I had to get strength from somewhere to live shut up with three old, sick people and a bunch of rioting kids the whole year. But he could not grasp it completely. He said to me: "Since you cannot go without it, why don't you do it with some man from the village? There is a chance you might fix it and get married, and then you won't need to roam God's erratic world."

But what I enjoyed was precisely that anonymity, not knowing the other person, that quick, animal encounter of two bodies that desire each other and fight until one wins. Only that. And when

things are not that way, when he insists on talking, on telling me things about his life and asking about mine, then I can't. The only thing I can do then is sacrifice myself, as with my children and my old people, and let him enjoy himself with no satisfaction on my part.

Don Luis couldn't understand it, nor did I want to go into details, but it was all quite clear to me, and I had no doubts left after what happened with Eusebio.

One day, when I was about fifty, my parents already gone, Eusebio, from the grocery, who had come back from Germany with some money, came into my house with a silly excuse and cornered me in the hall near the stairs. He panted and jabbered incoherently while he pressed me against his body. He smelled of acrid sweat, and through the open neck of his shirt I could see a mop of black, glossy hair. I liked it. I always liked to enmesh my fingers in the body hair and feel the wet skin and the throbbing of blood in the neck, in the genitals, in the chest. I sought, as in times before, the source of that violent throb that went from his body into mine and I let myself go. My mouth stuck to his mouth, my hand searched his heart anxiously, and I was about to possess him when, suddenly, Eusebio moved away a little to look me in the face and said: "And don't worry about Aunt Sabina—we'll move her in with my mother and both will be contented." I couldn't go on. I put the knife back in the pocket of my skirt and refused him. I told him there were people coming, or something of the sort, and I never gave him the opportunity to come close again.

It wasn't fear that made me act like that. I could have had my satisfaction as in previous times and then say that he had attacked me and I had defended myself. Who would have doubted my word? Who would think of any other motive? But if I couldn't feel pleasure, why do it? So, I had to go on with my trips, which, I must say, became more difficult, because it is not easy at my age to find a man with the characteristics I require. Some women look for company, tenderness, friendship, intellectual or spiritual understanding, or even some simple physical pleasure you can buy with money. Not me. For me, pleasure means pure and mutual desire, the encounter of two anonymous bodies, a fight and a complete, total possession.

But I am afraid that the Catholic Ladies Association will not understand this, nor will the members of the City Council, or those ex-pupils that have collaborated in my homage. That's why I told the President that it is much better if they organize a banquet and give me one of those silver trays with the names of all participants engraved on it, and, maybe later, when I am gone, they can publish this remembrance in case it can be of use to somebody.

## I ONLY THINK OF YOU

This morning, while I was making our bed, I was thinking how life's full of ups and downs, and how strange people are. We never get to know each other completely and we never appreciate what we have until we lose it. This bed seems to me too big again now, what a nuisance it is to have so much cloth. Mama said so when we bought it: you two are too short for it, and the sheets from the dowry won't be of any use, and it's so expensive.

It was certainly expensive, but we surely made good use of it. I soon realized you liked beds, I mean, women, from the way you looked at me the first time we met. An ex-priest. Mama said: at least he has a good education. But Papa thought you were not to be trusted: a respectable man should not change his mind. What with that way of thinking, the family's rental income getting thinner and thinner, and the obsession that 'good wine needs no bush,'<sup>1</sup> we four sisters had reached thirty still unmarried. Of course, it was not only Papa's fault. Marriageable men were scarce in the town, most of them left after finishing their studies or their military service. And we were too timid and somewhat unattractive. Mama used to say: With that little charm you've got you'll be left to dress images of saints.<sup>2</sup> And Aunt Mercedes, who took it personally, although nobody was thinking of her, answered emphatically: Better to dress saints than to undress drunkards; I don't know why she said that, because Papa was a rigorous teetotaler and, at home, there was no other man to undress.

<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: The Spanish expression 'El buen vino no necesita bandera' has been translated as closely as possible. It is also the equivalent to 'There is no need to gild the lily.'

<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: 'Quedar para vestir santos' is the Spanish expression for 'To be left on the shelf.' I opted for a literal translation so as to keep the sense of Aunt Mercedes' answer.

When you turned up to teach the boy Latin, I liked the way you looked at my legs and my low neckline. Your eyes entered through the neck of my blouse to my breasts, or went from my knees up my thighs to that precise point where my legs were tenaciously pressed together. You made me nervous and my hands moved unconsciously to where you were looking, and then you smiled as if you were smiling at Mama's comments, and she was quite pleased: That man is neither good looking nor rich, she said, but he is attentive and will make a good husband.

She said that in order to push me and to counterbalance Papa's misgivings and my sisters' jokes: that you crossed your hands like Don José, the dean; whether you were balding or the bare spot on your head was tonsure... Just jealousy. Being single there, in town, with Papa, Mama, four girls, Grandmother Dolores and Aunt Mercedes was unbearable. Any of them would have married you if only to come to Madrid. Me too, but at the beginning it wasn't clear whom you liked. Mama said you were thinking it over, because one could leave priesthood but not a marriage. Aunt Mercedes said—she was always saying annoying things—: He'll marry the dumbest one. And it was me. The others started to talk about your balding and the priestly gestures, but I didn't care. I wasn't in love, I mean, not at the beginning. I was still waiting for my Prince Charming: good-looking, rich, elegant, with experience in life and the wide world. And so were the others. Dreams are for free and if it is only for the asking... But I wanted to leave home and, besides, I liked the way you looked at me, and the way you said: Marry me and you'll know what's what.

What I could not imagine was that you were such a little devil in bed—although you said it was no perversion, that when people are married they may try everything. I've never doubted your word; after all you had been a priest and had learned it all in books written in Latin so as not to scandalize ignorant people. I was ignorant and you taught me all I know, but one of the things that bothers me now is that if you are not married all this might be sinful, and, by entertaining myself in my solitude I may now be sentencing my soul.

That was what was holding me back at the beginning: the fear of doing something bad or ugly. And I was also disturbed by the changes. I like routine; I enjoy knowing beforehand what comes afterwards. But you were restless and used to get bored very quickly; you were always looking for new things: first it was the red light, which reminded me of measles; then you suggested using suspenders, black nylons and high heels. Later it was trying different positions, some of which—and this is not a matter of prudery, Pepe<sup>3</sup>—would have been unthinkable even for acrobats in the circus. When you came down with lumbago, we moved on to theatre. And finally videos... Oh, Lord! If it were not for the videos I would still have you with me.

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<sup>3</sup> Translator's note: In the Spanish language 'Pepe' is a very commonly-used nickname for the name 'José.'

You were very patient with me and did everything so well. I remember when you wanted me to tell you whom I was thinking of when we made love. I told you: only of you. And in order to prompt me, you said that sometimes you thought of the cashier in the supermarket, who had tits like melons, or of Sofia Loren; you liked them big, you said, big breasted, but I knew that you also liked me. That was the best in you: that way of looking at me that made me wet.

Sometimes I also thought of someone else. I liked what you did to me, I had a very good time with you but, even Mama said so, you weren't good looking. You were short, rather fat, and bald, that's why sometimes I closed my eyes and saw... I didn't want to tell you whom I saw, because I wanted to keep some secrets to myself and, above all, because I didn't want to make you uneasy. I was very grateful to you, darling, and you were right: my sisters were as wrinkled as raisins, and I, thanks to you, looked as fresh as a daisy, even though some positions gave me sciatica. But all that is of no importance now and I want to tell you: I saw Ben Hur. Ah, Pepe, just imagine! Such a piece of a man! I've never seen anybody like him, neither in the streets nor on the beach, although I keep looking, never, and besides, in Technicolor and half dressed-half nude as a Roman, he was quite a sight. So that's what I was thinking about while we rehearsed positions. When we played theatre I didn't need to think of anybody.

Acting was what I enjoyed most, because in my youth, I never told you that either, I wanted to be an actress. There you are, what an idea, imagine someone telling my father: Don Ataulfo's daughter, a comedian! He'd rather see me dead! But I always liked it and I think I have a talent for it. I loved acting the innocent maid with you: *Please, Don José, don't do that to me...! Oh, don't touch me there...!* I was very good in that role, you must admit. And I also liked the role of the woman who wants and wants not, when you would put on your overalls or that shirt with no sleeves and I would say to you: *You are so strong! Look at those muscles in your arms...!* And then: *Oh, no, no! Please! Let me go, let me go! Oh...!* Modesty apart, I was superb in that role. I was so good at it, that we almost had a serious problem. Now that it's all over I can tell you, and I hope you understand.

One day a man came to take away the settee because I wanted to have it upholstered. He is a young fireman who does this kind of job in his spare time. He arrived, took one of the big armchairs in the living room and pushed it up over his head as if it were a feather. And I said, without thinking: You are so strong! It must have been the tone, because the boy looked at me in surprise, and stood for a few seconds with the armchair in the air, looking at me as if I were a ghost. It was a difficult moment, because it crossed my mind that he was thinking: What's wrong with this fat old lady? It was an embarrassing situation, but it was a challenge too, my love. I had always wanted to be an actress. When my sisters dreamed of clothes or cars, I dreamed of stages and limelight. I even felt

envious of the comedians that performed in Main Square! So I took a deep breath and recited the monologue from the beginning at one go: *What a strong back! Look at those muscles in your arms! It's clear that you exercise a lot*—with the right tone, the appropriate gestures, looking at him with great admiration, but from a certain distance, and talking slowly, without rushing. I did so well, Pepe! Not even Sarah Bernard could improve it. The young man left the armchair on the floor and stammered: Is there anybody else in the house? I shook my head no, and everything ran its course to the very end.

I didn't tell you about this then because I didn't think of it as an infidelity, but as a moment of success in my failed career as an actress. I did it so well that the upholstery man started calling in two or three times a week, between five and six, when neither the maid nor the caretaker were here. I tried to refuse him in the beginning, but when I said my *let me go, let me go or I'll shout!* I was already in the role. My talent blossomed, Pepe, I can tell you with no false modesty: I could have made a career on stage; you should have seen me gathering speed and saying *Go on, go on, please* and the rest. As it happened, we ended up being good friends, because the young man had an impotence problem with his girlfriend and, thanks to me, he solved it and they got married, and he named his first daughter after me out of gratitude.

So I think that was more of a charity job than anything else, because I—and I am not saying this to flatter you, Pepe—I enjoyed doing it with you more than I ever have with anybody else. With the others, I feel the satisfaction of a well-done job, as if I were reciting *What is life? Illusions, a shadow, a fiction*<sup>4</sup>... that, you'll remember, was written in bronze letters on the entrance to the Council House in Brétema. When I was a girl I used to repeat those lines from the landing of the stone stairs, which resembled a theatre stage, and I did so with such feeling that one day the Mayor came out and told my father: You have a real actress at home, Don Ataulfo... And from then on my father forbade me to ever again make an appearance there.

The theatre is now my only consolation, Pepe. No more positions, no more videos; I took a loathing to them, because I think that if that evening you hadn't gone out to rent one, you would still be with me.

When the police called I knew that something bad had happened to you; you had never taken so long in choosing a videotape. They told me to go to the hospital and there they gave me your raincoat, your umbrella, your hat, your broken glasses, the wallet and the porn video. I was told that a car had run you over when you were crossing the street.

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<sup>4</sup> Translator's note: Well-known lines from Pedro Calderón de la Barca's play *La vida es sueño* (1635) [*Life is a Dream*].

I was paid insurance money, even though it was apparently your fault, as the lights were green for cars. I wonder what you were thinking about! Probably of the dinner I would be cooking and the bottle of wine that we would drink between us, and then there would come the video and our games, not worrying about closing doors, or taking care to speak in whispers, since nobody would come to interrupt, as it was just you and me alone, Pepe, no family, no children, just the two of us, nearing old age, but happy and ready to enjoy what we had... What an inconvenient moment for you to die, when I still have such a long time to live alone!

That's why I am considering what the engineer on floor fifteen has said to me, do you remember him? A tall man with white hair. He's a widower too and has just retired. We met in the supermarket and he started by carrying my bag and now wants us to get married. And I don't know what to do. I would rather not get married, you know, I don't like changes, but I'm getting worried now, because when you're married everything is plain and clear, otherwise it's bad news. And it's the same with the videos; I was very anxious about them and told my confessor. He told me not to worry, that you were my husband and had always come home to watch them with your wife. But if, for instance, I watch a video with Julian, that's the name of the engineer on floor fifteen, and then I die of a heart attack, I might condemn myself, and that's not fair either, I say. So, looking at it from that angle it might be better for me to get married, but then I have a serious problem, because I'll be unfaithful to him in my thoughts. And I don't mean with Ben Hur, which can be easily understood by any man.

So this is what I wanted to tell you, Pepe: how life twists and turns and how strange we people are that we always want what we cannot get. Because when I make love now, with Julian or with the upholstery boy, who has impotence problems again, I play my role and I even enjoy it, but while I am saying to them *Oh, what are you doing to me! Oh, go on, go on, please...!* while I undress them and caress them, I close my eyes and think of you. I only think of you.



# “Like a Night with Legs Wide Open”

by José Alcántara Almánzar

translated by Luis Guzmán Valerio

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## INTRODUCTION

“Like a Night with Legs Wide Open” is a short story by Dominican writer José Alcántara Almánzar. Originally published in the collection titled *La carne estremecida* in 1989, this short story is representative of the themes that characterize Alcántara Almánzar’s short stories, namely, the challenges and anxieties of the stifled Dominican middle class.

José Alcántara Almánzar began his writing career in 1973 with the publication of the short story collection titled *Viaje al otro mundo*. He has published over twenty essay and short story collections. His most recent publication is the essay collection *Hijos del Silencio* published by Editorial Isla Negra in 2018. Outside of the Dominican Republic, his work in Spanish has appeared in Bulgaria, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Spain, and the United States. In 2018, Lizabeth

Paravisini-Gebert published with Cecilia Graña *Where the Dream Ends*, a selection of Alcántara Almánzar's short stories in English translation. His work has also appeared in French, German, Italian, and Icelandic translations. In addition to several other awards, Alcántara Almánzar was awarded the Premio Anual del Cuento [Annual Short Story Prize] in his country on two occasions: in 1984 for the collection *Las máscaras de la seducción* and in 1990 for *La carne estremecida*. In 2009 he was presented with the *Premio Nacional de Literatura* [National Prize for Literature]. However, despite several awards in the Dominican Republic and a book length translation in English, his work remains largely unknown to readers in the United States.

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Luis Guzmán Valerio holds a Ph.D. in Latin American, Iberian, and Latino Cultures from The Graduate Center at the City University of New York and an M.A. in Translation from the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus. He published his first literary translation in the 2008-2009 II issue of *Sargasso: A Journal of Caribbean Literature, Language & Culture*. In the last year, he has published literary translations in *Delos: A Journal of Translation and World Literature*, *BODY Literature*, and *Five:2:ONE*. His creative writing has appeared in *Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts, and Cultures*.

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## LIKE A NIGHT WITH LEGS WIDE OPEN

The endless line moved at an exasperatingly slow pace. I thought that only the unwholesomeness of the ads could attract such a crowd to a Bertolucci film, since I found it hard to believe that the cause for all the commotion was an aging Brando and a practically unknown actress who could be his daughter. There were too many people and I was afraid I wouldn't find anywhere to sit. An uncomfortable drizzle was falling and, among all the sweaty bodies bustling to get a ticket, a sticky vapor set in, gluing clothing to skin, forcing many to give up and leave the line cursing.

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She was right in front of me, and I was making an effort to maintain a reasonable distance between us, absorbing the pushing and shoving to avoid an embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, miss," I excused myself when I couldn't help colliding into her, "everybody wants to go in at the same time, you see..."

"Don't worry, sir," she said. "It's not the eagerness to see the movie that's causing this mess, but the fear of the approaching downpour."

We looked up at the reddish, thundering sky that announced an angry, imminent downpour. I remained stuck to her body, as though it belonged to me. In a flash of lightning, I had seen her yellow eyes, her upturned nose, her mouth telling me "don't worry, sir," and now she didn't mind the rubbing of my aroused body against hers. "If Elena finds out," I thought, "she'll scratch my eyes out."

"If you like, miss, I'll buy your ticket and you can wait over there." I pointed to the crowded theater lobby. "Tell the usher to let you in, that you'll give him your ticket in a little while."

She left the line and then I could have a better look at her. She was slim, more petite rather than midsize, with beautiful legs and a determined walk. She didn't run from the rain. She walked unhurriedly, pleased to take every step, extremely sure of what she was doing. I lost sight of her as I approached the box office, where the pushing and shoving were unbearable. We all wanted to cram

our hands through the box office window. After putting up with a few more shoves, I got the tickets and escaped unharmed from the line.

“Finally!” I said as I shook out my shirt.

She was wearing black: a low-cut sweater and a super tight miniskirt.

“I forgot to give you the money for my...”

“Oh, it’s no big deal,” I interrupted her, “it’s my treat.”

She had enormous eyelashes, thin eyebrows with a natural outline, small ears with studded earrings...

“You don’t even know my name.”

...white, even teeth—somewhat protruding on the top—a face without any makeup on...

“Well, that’s easy, you can tell me and that’ll be that.”

...an evenly sculpted chin, somewhat high cheekbones with slight dimples celebrating a smile.

“Carolina.”

She said it with submissive eyes that tried to take refuge behind the brown locks of hair that fell over her forehead and moving a pair of lips that lured you to bite.

“And I accept,” she added, “if you’ll allow me to get you something to drink.”

A large, prominent mole stood out on her slender neck, and she had another, minute one on her chest, very close to her breasts, which rose daringly under the sweater’s blackness. Carolina smiled, approaching me with an irresistible naughtiness.

“You still haven’t told me your name,” she whispered. “What’s your name?”

“Emilio.”

I hate soft drinks, but I could not refuse her offer, and the first sip of that sickly sweet liquid appealed to me probably because of my thirst. We sat in the back. We still had a few minutes before the film began and the theater looked jam-packed. I was relieved not to see any acquaintances.

“Emilio, we were lucky.”

Her voice made me forget the pushing and shoving in the line, the sweat and water that ran down my body, and the presence of so many people elbowing each other to find a seat.

The tensions the images impressed upon the spectators undulated in the frigid air of the movie theater. There was a heavy, anguished silence. Brando grew in stature as his superb acting unfolded, unsettling the audience with those memorable scenes where he would entrap his lover and make her suffer and rejoice with his brutal onslaughts. Paying careful attention to what was happening on the screen, Carolina did not once look at me. We were quiet during the show, and a few times—without her taking notice—I carefully observed her. I moved my hand over hers in a less than ingenuous way and she didn’t move. The provocations of a spoiled pussycat pulsed in her soft

skin. I didn't need to look at her anymore. Her burning skin was enough. I thought of Elena once again, who must have been waiting for me at home, reading some boring novel and smoking one cigarette after another until she was overcome by sleep.

When the movie was over, the downpour was in full force. We could not see more than three meters from the theater. A crowd prevented the exit of those willing to risk catching a cold.

"The deluge," Carolina said taking out a handkerchief from her purse.

"You don't mind going out like this?" I asked as I took her arm.

"No. I like rain." She passed a handkerchief over her head, looking at me with mischievous eyes that said: "We're going to do something crazy."

Suddenly, a blackout left everything in darkness, hastening the stampede of those who were undecided. We crossed the street splashing in the water, letting the furious rain drench us. We held hands, like two kids jumping in the rain on a Friday afternoon. We found my car on the verge of sinking into the river that formed along the gutter. Once inside, I kissed Carolina with such force that she surely was not expecting it. We kissed without speaking, our wet skin did it for us, crying out with passionate signals. Carolina had spongy lips and an eager, trained mouth that savored mine, looking for a point of equilibrium in its exploration. I felt the heat of her wet body and happily breathed in the last traces of a magnolia fragrance stuck to her skin, with a taste of candied almonds that aroused my greed.

The car windows had fogged up and I thought I was safe from indiscreet glances. From the outside, flashes of light came in from those driving from south to north, navigating the flooded street.

"This city has nothing to envy Venice for," I said facetiously.

Carolina smiled. I turned the car on, wanting to warm it up so as not to end up stranded in a puddle, while at the same time yielding to those who took pains to flee that mess.

"Can I invite you for a drink someplace quiet?" I proposed, calculating a logical way to escape the confusion, honking, and blinding lights of impatient motorists.

"I think that's a good idea," she said naturally.

I lowered the window a little to see the gondolas adrift in their pitiful attempts to maneuver the flooded canal of the street. Carolina dried her bare feet with the handkerchief. I felt the urge to smoke. I looked for my cigarettes thinking that I could really use one, but they were soaked. I threw the useless box onto the back seat, cursing under my breath.

"What did you think of the movie, Carolina?"

“I didn’t understand it,” she confessed shamelessly. “Besides, how pessimistic, especially that horrible ending.”

She was onto something, for sure. I liked her spontaneity, the way she said things without premeditation, and the courage to present herself for what she was, leaving her charms and limitations out in the open.

“How about you, Emilio, did you like it?”

“A lot. Although I agree with you on one point, it was depressing, like the world today.”

We drove a few blocks until we reached Parque Independencia—an enclosed sanctuary that never sleeps—where I thought I would find cigarettes, but didn’t see a single street vendor around and the night-owl cafés had closed their doors to avoid any possible damage from the storm. On Avenida 30 de Marzo, we were finally away from the flooding. I pawed at Carolina’s legs, as she wrung the drops of water out of her hair. She let me pet her, as though she were accustomed to that traffic of caresses. She displayed firm thighs, slippery, compact masses that rubbed up against my daring hand in a game that smelled very predictable. On Avenida 27 de Febrero we stopped at a red light.

“Where are we going?” I perceived a slight impatience in her voice.

Actually, I hadn’t decided what motel we would go to. Surrounded by such establishments, the city offered hiding places for every taste, occasion, and budget. We were at a major intersection. We could go in any direction and every which way we would find shelter and discretion in exchange for a modest sum. I thought of a close, decent hideaway.

“Someplace you’ll like very much,” I said putting my foot on the accelerator when the green light gave us the right of way.

The motel—a group of small, individual cabins surrounded by trees—turned out to be more comfortable and discreet than I anticipated. We crossed a wide gate and I turned the window half way down to make out an empty cabin. The rain had tapered off and the breeze cooled the air, providing relief from the oppressive heat. Carolina put her head on my shoulder and her hand nestled itself under my drenched shirt. The cabins looked abandoned, although all the lit-up windows contradicted the supposed solitude of the place. In the back, somewhat hidden among pine trees, we found a vacant cabin. The garage door closed automatically just after I parked the car. We went in and, without giving her time to say anything, I took Carolina by the waist and held her tight against my chest. Our mouths eagerly sought each other out in the darkness. Standing up, still wet, uncomfortable although aroused enough to ignore undesirable details, our eagerness overcame us. I felt around and pressed a light switch. A lamp came on in a corner of the tiny living room.

In the adjoining bedroom we fell onto the bed—two felines frolicking around before copulation—tearing off the clothes that obstructed our caresses, licking one another, savoring the tastes that flowed from every inch of skin; our bodies welded together in an affectionate yet savage embrace; our noses, caught by the gluttony of smell, became drunk from the sweet-and-sour scents, the fragrances of candied almonds, magnolia water, sweat, drops of rain, saliva, discovering possible secrets, hidden needs, desires that fueled the rhythm of our undulating movements, the balancing act of surrendering and taking, concaving and convexing in a dialogue of affirmations and negations; the supple nakedness that led me to descend from the insatiable mouth to the juicy, hard breasts with large, dark nipples so addicting with every bite, and from there to the elastic region under which the vital organs lay dormant; and from there on to the sinuous labyrinth of intricate folds that we never know in its entirety, portal to the world, carnivorous corolla, dead-end chamber, where I sucked the generous, marinated fluids from Carolina, who asked for more and more and groaned while she held on to the mess of my hair, locking her legs around my back, begging me not to leave her alone at that singular moment; something good was coming; the end was near, the ephemeral triumph just like a shot, violent like the impacts of a blast; and then I rode her, penetrating the mysterious portico that was already mine, bewitched by that inexhaustible fountain that wouldn't stop watering, that wetland where I lost myself, seeing Elena's portrait in her transformed face, responding to my thrusts with Elena's sensual voice, seeking me out with Elena's arms, Elena's distant eyes, her huge eyelashes fluttering with pleasure, the same joyful contraction of Elena's mouth during the supreme moment of pleasure, when in unison Carolina and I identified with each other completely in vital agony.

Carolina, under my sweaty body, appeared melancholic; she breathed serenely, with a slight fatigue stamped on her clear, intensely glowing eyes; her fingers twirled the tousled hair on my head and torso, outlining my lips as they navigated her face in that infinite peace following orgasm. I looked for a comfortable position for her, lying beside her without losing contact with the warmth of that small, well-formed body I could not stop caressing. The fantasy with Elena worried me, her image and Carolina's blending in delicious circles, invading my clandestine intimacy with her memory.

“What are you thinking about?”

“A drink and a cigarette,” I lied. “It's time we drank something, don't you think?”

“Very good. I'm going to the bathroom first,” she answered.

When she got up, I gazed at her entire body. Seldom had I seen such a shapely figure, almost like Elena's when we were married...

“What would you like to drink?”

...a body without a single excess, nothing out of place: her straight hair cut at her shoulders; her well-proportioned, delicate arms; her back forming an arc that blended into full, sculpted buttocks; round thighs joining legs in flexible articulations that gave her walk that distinctive stride.

“Beer,” she said as she got lost in the bathroom.

Through the intercom, I ordered a cold beer, cigarettes, and matches. I shivered, sneezed, and covered myself with the sheet. From the bathroom, Carolina asked me to join her. I gathered the courage and jumped up ready to please her. There, the change in temperature gave me goose bumps, I sneezed again, and Carolina, making fun of me, splashed water on me so that I would make up my mind once and for all. I loved the warm shower. I held Carolina in my arms and closed my eyes to eternalize that unrepeatable moment, before we began a ritual of suds, bubbles, massages, and renewed explorations.

I was drying off when the bell rang announcing the cigarettes and the drinks.

“Ah, a nice, tall cold one!” I said happily as I opened the bottle.

I filled two glasses, handing one to Carolina, who was walking out of the bathroom wrapped in one towel, using another as a turban on her head. Without taking my eyes off her, I chugged the contents of the glass and then lit a cigarette. I inhaled deep, enjoying the smoke and the sense of well-being that had overtaken me.

“You have an enviable look of happiness on your face,” she said as she sat down on the bed, taking the cigarette from my lips.

“I’m a man who’s easy to please.”

Her pampered, feline eyes lit up. I noticed the flaming curiosity that burned in her pupils, her rose-apple colored cheeks, her upturned nose, her half-open mouth seeking me out again.

“What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a lawyer.” She looked unconvinced. “You can take this, in case you need my professional services some day.”

I looked for my wallet, took out a business card, and handed it to her, inwardly regretting having made such a blunder. By revealing my identity, I was destroying the fascination with things forbidden.

“I’m a secretary, but I don’t have a card.” Her smile accented her dimples.

I was afraid we would start getting personal and I tried to avoid it. I put out my cigarette, I kissed Carolina, and we drank more beer. We went back to the caresses, the dissolute contacts that made our fire burn: mouth against mouth, lips and whispers on the ears; her eyelids half-open; her hands wrapped around my back; my traveling hands finding comfort in the warmth and softness, passing from one contour to another with the laziness of a silkworm; again the image of Elena, her

light body riding my torso with words of ecstasy, Elena's groaning, her disheveled hair, her sweaty skin, her yearning breath, Elena's lustfulness; my body weighing down on hers, searching for the entrance; a voluntary prisoner submitting himself with pleasure to Carolina or Elena, two, three, four times, in ceremonies that were so similar and yet so different.

I must have fallen asleep during one of those pauses that followed each gorging session, when we would drown ourselves in beer and cigarettes to tone up our desires. Carolina had vanished and an emptiness hit me in the stomach when I saw my wallet open on top of the night table. But I found everything there: money, cards, driver's license. I leaned my aching head against the pillow and then I saw her note, written in small letters on a napkin:

*Emilio:*

*I had a divine time, thanks for everything. I promise to call you later to know if you got home okay.*

*Carolina.*

She had vanished without any questions or demands, without taking anything. Perhaps, like me, she had found in the adventure of an anonymous night some compensation for the life without incentives of those of us who inhabit this hydra-headed city. It was three thirty. I got dressed—the taste of Carolina still in my mouth, her persistent scent in my nose—paid the bill, and returned to the now rainless streets, where streams of muddy water still flowed; to dark, solitary avenues; to the air's fleeting clarity as Saturday began; to enjoy that clear sky that almost made me believe in happiness, had it not been for the sleepless little girl with a dirty face who offered me a bouquet of withered carnations for one peso at the intersection of two major thoroughfares.

I drove aimlessly, overtaken by the illusion of that chance encounter. It must have been five when I arrived home. I took off my shoes so as not to awaken Elena and, with the ease of a blind man who knows his own world of darkness like the back of his hand, I walked to our bedroom, lay down, covered myself with part of the sheet. In the yard, a drainpipe dripped monotonously and soporifically; frogs croaked in the wet grass and potted plants; and the dog sniffed around celebrating the break of dawn. Elena gave off a delicate scent of candied almonds. The sheets smelled like essence of magnolias. Elena's warm hands began to seek me out instinctively. They encircled my neck. Elena's legs trapped my body like two pincers. Now it was Carolina who assailed me with an embrace that I received without resistance in the morning's complicity, letting Elena hug me with her eager hands and heavy breathing, biting my ears, squeezing my throat, tying my body down with the

sheet, getting on top of me, covering my face with the pillow, cutting off my access to air, asphyxiating me...

“Emilio, what’s the matter?” Elena woke me up. “Are you having a nightmare?”

I opened my eyes, sat up, agitated and sweaty. Elena turned on the small lamp on her night table and her sleepy face appeared. She asked me if I wanted a glass of water. She passed a tender hand over my forehead.

“No, I’m fine,” I said, “go back to sleep, don’t worry.”

“You ate too much,” she said without noticing the time and went back to sleep as though she had not woken up.

I was confused, with the lively scenes of a very long orgy still bubbling over in my mind, a fleeting illusion, a discharge of my imagination. I got up, and noticing my absolute nakedness, I put on my bathrobe, lit a cigarette, and went to the window like a sleepwalker, reconstructing the episodes in my dream. In the yard, the drainpipe brought with it rainwater and nocturnal mirages. The frogs croaked in their damp corners. The dog reenacted his eternal role of night-watch. I stood in front of the window for a long time, smoking, absorbed by the dawn light, going over things in my head. The phone rang. I ran to my night table and picked up the receiver...

“Who is it?” asked Elena half asleep, still submerged in slumber.

“No one,” I said, hanging up. “They dialed the wrong number.”

I disconnected the phone. I sank, disturbed, into my pillow, with the thought of Carolina harassing me, Carolina’s voice buzzing in my ears, her very clear presence between Elena and me, among those blankets that gave off an unmistakable scent of magnolias and candied almonds.

# “The Guide through Death” *and* “The Fat Lady”

by **Guadalupe Dueñas**

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*translated by* **Josie Hough**

## INTRODUCTION

These two short stories are part of the *Obras completas [Complete Works]* of **Guadalupe Dueñas**, most recently published by Fondo de Cultura Económica in 2017. Like much of Dueñas’ work, *Guía en la muerte [The Guide through Death]* is written in the first person. The narrator describes a tour of the *Museo de las Momias* in Guanajuato, Mexico, detailing the tragic and twisted stories of different mummies in the museum, following the eponymous guide. Most have met their end because of some sort of sin or crime, and like many of Dueñas’ characters were destined for misfortune whether or not they complied with the stereotypical role expected of them. Equally, *La dama gorda [The Fat Lady]*

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Rincón de Traductores/Translators’ Corner 009 (2020)

ISSN: 2694-2801 (online) 2694-281X (print)

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tells the tale of a character who meets a tragic death because of her greed and gluttony, associating these sins with her wealth and social position.

Dueñas' work was heavily influenced by her Catholic beliefs, but her faith did not stop her writing critically of religion. Born in 1920, she did not fit the conventional role of a Catholic Mexican woman at her time, never marrying or having children, and she wrote of both matrimony and motherhood with disdain and irony. While her work was not explicitly feminist, her critique of traditional roles of women and of their disadvantaged position in comparison to men suggest a feminist ideology. Dueñas worked for some time for the government, censoring television programmes, and was personally close with several politicians throughout her life; and yet her novel *Memoria de una espera* was never published due to its critical view of the bureaucracy of the Mexican political system. She made the contradictions in her life and ideology clear through symbolism, dark humour and an ironic view of the world around her.

Dueñas' main output was short stories, a genre that has a long and rich tradition in Mexico. The themes underlying Dueñas' work and her style of writing resonate with the trends of Mexican literature in the fifties and sixties; however, she has been omitted from most anthologies and research on Mexican writers from the era and remains little known outside of Mexico.

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## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Josie Hough holds a Masters in Translation from the University of Sheffield (UK). Her Masters dissertation developed a feminist approach to the translation of short stories by Mexican writer Guadalupe Dueñas and during her studies she participated in other literary translation projects of French- and Spanish-language works. Hough currently works in Madrid as a translator and content writer specializing in travel and tourism, pursuing her interest in literary translation on the side.

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## THE GUIDE THROUGH DEATH

A patch of withered fungi prickles the tourists ambling through the long underground stone passageway.

At its end, bodies lean against the wall. Characterless corpses like bare logs, with the nakedness of the eternal. This is the treasure of a town that dances with death.

Our hearts miss a beat as we behold the unsettling rigidity of their cortège.

In the shrieks contorting their mouths, in the enduring distortion of their faces, in that climax that forced their eyes out of their sockets, they are crying out for God... and as their almighty invocation intensifies, the chilling lament pierces our bones and our blood curdles at what is to come.

None of these faces tell a happy story. There is something sacrilegious in the fraudulence of their existence, in the diabolic game that holds their silhouettes prisoner. Poised in pain under our sordid gaze they lay, clutched in that moment of agony.

*What are we doing here, us intruders with still-pulsing blood; us who shiver in the shade; us who while away real hours in front of their blind and shrivelled eyes; us who suffer the obscenity of their gaze as we chew gum with complete indifference?*

We follow the guide through the narrow crypt. He too seems to be from some species different to ours. He reveals one effeminate hand, attempting to conceal the other in the bulky folds of his soldier's uniform, but its ill-fitting sleeve exposes a withered arm ending in a stump. His ragged scarf reveals centuries of grime; snake-like, it coils around his neck, shedding threads, writhing into his beard and half-obscuring the oldest face on Earth. With morbid familiarity he touches the displayed corpses; taps a beat upon their sunken stomachs; brushes, with the fingers of his one beautiful hand, their most intimate nakedness.

'They're going to be put behind glass,' he explains, 'because the visitors are getting very bold. Someone took a little child's hand as a souvenir; others tear out their hair... since almost all of them suffered a tragic death, they're used as amulets to protect against accidents.'

‘This one was hung for desertion’ he adds, pointing out one of the figures.

We contemplate him with interest. Too young. His tongue lolls out of his mouth onto his chest. His woollen drawers lead down to his army boots, which have shamefully not been removed. A blanket of mould shrouds the guilty soles that failed to save his nomadic feet; they’re still intact, with only the final voyage on their horizon.

‘Here’s the reprobate,’ the guide announces. ‘Liberal, atheist, thirty-third degree freemason, he died blaspheming. He was not permitted a Christian funeral, so his wife buried him in the courtyard.’

The distinctive emblem of the square and compass squats like a tarantula upon his imposing black suit. One arm behind his back and one fist on his chest he stands undaunted for all eternity, a mass isolated in his own fate.

‘The adulterer murdered by her husband!’ his cry recalls a feria bingo-caller.

Around her throat, the blackened cord is a mourning ribbon binding a lifeless rose. The perfect oval of her face preserves its chiselled features above the wilted petals. The closed eyes, facing inward terror, extend their lashes in decoration; her mouth holds a rotting black clot; the arms are contorted as if in an odalisque’s dance, and on her hands only the mother of pearl on her nails remain, silver scales upon acacia leaves. I understand: she was so fragile that she provoked her own demise.

The guide wants to move straight past a woman still writhed in her final convulsion, but someone questions him. He turns back irritably:

‘This lady was buried alive. She was very rich. She unexpectedly survived an attack. She still has relatives in town; her grandchildren have a shop here. They say that her first born, a child prodigy and violin player at just seven years old, was scarred from the neck down when one day, by accident, she spilled boiling honey on him. The burn devoured his arm and the little artist’s hand had to be amputated. He ran away from home. His father, distraught, could never forgive her. Years later, the little boy returned. It is said that only he and his father suspected that she wasn’t dead, but they buried her in a hurry.’

The woman, her fingers damaged, full of splinters and broken down to the bone, is preserved in obesity. Despite the narrowness of the coffin she has somehow turned face down. Her stomach squeezes out freely towards one side and a heavy curtain of petrified fat covers her hips; her bust, of repulsive dimensions, paws at her back; her arms flung in a cross in the ultimate desperation.

We follow the ill-tempered guide, who attempts futilely to light a cigarette with a trembling hand.

‘This general killed himself when the insurgents took over the square,’ he explains almost delightedly.

Jewel-encrusted decorations shine upon his shroud of rags. Dark sideburns and whiskers the colour of sugarcane. Tall and majestic, the crown-like scar that puckers his forehead reminds us of Maximilian I. Inert and rigid, he oversees a parade of phantom squadrons.

‘Mother and child,’ indicates the guide almost immediately.

Slashed open, her stomach reveals her insides; the cavity retaining not one droplet of blood. A paleness beyond vertigo gives her skin the transparency of vellum and her face holds a look of astonishment at her untimely death. The baby hangs wrapped in her entrails, born and yet unborn; stiff, its tiny clenched fists grasp the labyrinthine umbilical cord strangling it and entwining its head like fruit pulled from a tree. On his mother’s swollen breasts rest rivers of pearls, and behind eyeless lids rest her useless sobs.

‘The bride,’ says the curator as he nears a new figure, ‘a perpetual spinster, she prayed novenas and even the bizarre San Pascual prayer taught by a seer. She practiced witchcraft— she used a Buddha amulet, three kangaroo hairs, snake’s saliva and seven grains of salt, but she dropped dead on her wedding day.’

She wears a greying dress of lace and orange blossom trim. Her gloved hands grip a picture of her fiancé, of whose sad face she dreamt for her whole life. Dusty tulle veils her yellowed wrinkles, but barely conceals the shower of pockmarks; she looks like an absurd pimped *virgencita*, like those which devoutly adorn the Daughters of Mary.

Finally, he points out two little girls dressed in wine-red and blue. Provincial dolls buried in their finest dresses and a little boy who drowned, tiny and dressed in his Sunday best, the tragic mausoleum mascot.

The guide coughs and hurriedly ends the visit. Us living shuffle back, stumbling over the skulls piled up to the ceiling.

A clumsy movement causes the scarf concealing the guide’s neck to slip down and, in his haste to recover himself, I see the repulsive burn puckering his flesh and sweeping across his chest.

I can’t stay here any longer. I hurry past the rest, towards real life. The buzz of the bees welcoming me back to daylight is music to my ears. I feel my hair, my heartbeat, my skin—I’m still alive! I can cry about my fleeting life. My veins flood with the certainty of my existence.

*Guanajuato, 2 November (Day of the Dead)*

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Rincón de Traductores/Translators’ Corner 009 (2020)

ISSN: 2694-2801 (online) 2694-281X (print)

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## THE FAT LADY

I'll always remember her like this: dressed in stone grey, with a starched piqué collar and stiffened cuffs peeking out from under her woollen coat.

She attended mass at the Church of the Holy Family, just a few streets away from the princely house which spanned the entire block and which, like those built during the Porfiriato, boasted a walled garden and stone balconies covered in trellises that would never grow.

46 The gate must have been worth a fortune; its carved bronze cupids, columns crowned with engraved panels and double fence likened it to a fortress.

It was all very mysterious, even for me, who spent twenty years spying on her.

The lady was always the same age, the same size, wore the same outfit, sat in the same splendid car driven by the same arrogant uniformed chauffeur in dark glasses, who, like his mistress, never deigned to associate with any of us.

I consider it a personal triumph that both he and the woman ended up greeting me despite themselves, although it could well have been one of my daydreams: he touched his hat intentionally, and the lady gave the faintest hint of an attempt at a smile. I was bestowed this honour in the mornings on the way to church; I always walked, making haste to coincide with them in the doorway. Besides this, they kept themselves hidden away. At night, not a single ray of light escaped from under the doors. On Fridays, the chauffeur went out in a rundown van and returned to the house laden down with goods: fruits, hams, meats, cheeses, colossal lobsters, duck, hare and tinned foods, enough to feed an army. No other movements disturbed that palace with its dozens of rooms and windows that stretched down the length of the two streets.

From my rooftop I could just about spy a genuine stained-glass ceiling bearing white-painted dahlias that must shade some terrace, or maybe the greenhouse. Climbing up my ladder I managed to glimpse the ends of some palm fronds, the ones that rich people keep in big porcelain pots.

The neighbourhood's curiosity had long worn out. Very rarely were they surprised by the comings and goings of the woman whose name they ignored, known to them only as "the fat lady".

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Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner 009 (2020)

ISSN: 2694-2801 (online) 2694-281X (print)

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Whenever anyone tried to elicit some reaction by calling at the gate, their attempts were met with an impenetrable silence. Beggars passed on by, savvy to the silence of the house.

The postman never stopped at this door and the neighbourhood kids tired of knocking to no response. Maybe they thought it was abandoned; locked and the key thrown away, a haunted house inhabited by ghosts. Only to my vigil was the secret known: at quarter to seven, the shutters would open to show the entire corridor sparkling like a diamond. The lady would descend four steps in order to settle her corpulence on the back seat of the limousine; the frail uniformed servant in his dark glasses respectfully opening its door, glistening as if he'd just polished it with spit. After taking the car out, he would hurriedly close the gate, fearful of furtive and indiscrete glances.

It would not have surprised me to discover that inside there were crocodiles, manta rays or rhinoceroses, or that the fat lady made deals with the devil. But what I never suspected, not even in my most audacious speculations, was what actually happened, more sinister than my wildest dreams.

I began to feel uneasy when, as every morning, I watched the car leave with the obese one, only this time the chauffeur was now a young blonde man with the face of an angel, no older than twenty, but serious and withdrawn like he too followed those instructions that forbade all communication. I feared that the old man was ill or had died.

I wasted useless smiles on this new character, inventing meetings and encounters at the church door. When I think back and remember these tiny details now, I'm filled with dread at my certainty that something strange happened to this beautiful being, with his strange eyelashes that sprouted clear but grew dark at the ends, like butterfly wings or like pale yellow flower pistils trimmed in ochre. He would lift his eyelids to reveal heliotrope blue eyes: flashing pupils that looked without seeing, like the eyes of the blind, but which shocked me to my core with the hostility they fixed on the fat lady. He didn't go in to mass, he stayed in the limousine, which had now started to lose its shine, fading into the same stone-grey colour as the lady's clothes, so that only her whiter than white starched collar and cuffs allowed her to be seen.

Months passed before the incident which horrified the entire neighbourhood. The door was wide open that morning and crowds traipsed through the rooms until the sight of the fat lady's murdered corpse stopped them in their tracks. Lain upon the rickety bed, eleven stab wounds slashed her vast body. Face up, in her eternal grey suit, she looked like an enormous snake sprawled over the Damask bedspread. The merciless lacerations to her neck had splattered the pristine collar, but her cuffs remained spotless.

Before the police arrived, I had time to wander amongst the curios of the house, wary of leaving any marks. I found the terrace with the stained glass and the greenhouse filled with those familiar palm fronds.

In the music room I saw shelves laden with the collection of miniature figurines from all over the world, and admired the doll house which auctioned for twenty thousand pesos with its thirty electric oil lamps; the Persian rugs and Gobelins upholstery from Austria; mirrors, golden display cabinets, books of psalms; grand pianos, marble staircases and curtains matching the furniture; bedsheets that never got used, tablecloths bought in 1900, dinner services still in their packaging. The refrigerator full of turkeys, cheeses, cold cuts. I imagined her chomping down lavishly succulent feasts. Lingering still were the oven-baked tarts, the overflowing moulds containing leftover macaroons, the baked eggs, the flans, the strawberries whipped with Chantilly cream. Untouched were the puff pastry chicken pies and entire platters of marinated quail; I discovered tongue in brine, almond-roasted pigeon, grilled hams; peach, plum and pineapple compotes, batches of marzipan and dulce de leche; jellies in every flavour and every colour of the rainbow, hazelnuts, chocolates, sugared almonds, imported fruits, foreign wines; all to sate the ferocious gluttony of this ten ton recluse who never shared one greeting with her neighbours; neighbours who now ran amok through her sanctuary as if it were a circus, without giving a single thought to the beauty in which her monstrous ego obligated her to exist, overfed and overwealthy.

Her insatiable guzzling made me shudder; cast a new light on her pudgy cheeks, engorged from consuming fine things, bulging so much they forced her watery blue distended eyes shut: eyes like one of those turkeys with sleepy lids that fluttered in nervous agitation as if they had suddenly remembered some moment of anguish. I'd watch her tiny sunken mouth as she prayed: fatty fleshy fish lips that could engulf kilometres of spaghetti in the blink of an eye. Maybe she used the oilskin apron hung on the arm of her chair, so she wouldn't splatter sauce down her flawless collar. Urgh—those enormous arms, so moist and milky-white and thick! I remember I couldn't see her meaty fingers without thinking of huge sausages. I'd watch as they groped the silver rosary, each bead of which had been blessed with litanies recited in Rome. Her hands devoured each Ave Maria like link after link of chorizo. I was gripped by my fascination of this inconceivably deformed monster. I, in contrast, could have been snapped like a noodle; scrawny and parched, my body barely cast a shadow.

She never knew of my terror at her immense existence, nor of the espionage of which she was my victim. I knew precisely how many herrings, tins of olives, jars of mayonnaise and spices the supermarket stocked just for her subsistence. During the day, I would contemplate the wall of silence that faced my window, where I'd sit sewing and wondering if the chauffeur assisted in her culinary

demands. Maybe he'd light the incinerator so he wouldn't have to take out the rubbish; the lobster shells, the goat bones and all the surplus dishes that beggars would never get to taste. All for her. The skeletal servant never ate, nor did the blonde angel who succeeded him; slender, ghostlike in his transparency.

I found myself looking through a photo album in which the lady appeared as a child of seven years, already chubby; her father beside her, a portly gentleman of impressive girth. The book was filled with portraits of the two, identical in their corpulence. In no photo did I see the mother or any other woman, only the fat lady dressed in lace and carrying a parasol; in her first communion outfit; in the uniform of some school in Paris or London; on the beach in a horrible striped costume; in a sumptuous evening gown. Another with a sailor's collar. On reaching the final leaf, I couldn't help but shriek at a group photo featuring a young man whose face I recognised: the very same who had disappeared, leaving the door wide open.

Trembling, I took my evidence to the policeman on guard who, aided by another, was sweeping the remains of the crime from the mansion. As I showed him the album, one of my neighbours gestured that I had a screw loose and was forever imagining things. Ignoring her insult, I persisted:

“This young man is the murderer, I know it. I saw him with my own eyes day after day.”

He pointed to the date, smirking: 1899. Indifferent to my concern, he sent me away.

Somehow I knew that the English embassy was in charge of the burial, and that evening I went to the funeral parlour. I was overcome by the emptiness of the chapel, until I noticed the presence of an old man. I didn't recognise him at first without his uniform: it was the chauffeur, wiping tears from his glasses. I approached him and touched his arm to alert him to my presence, but he made no acknowledgement, as if still scared to disobey his mistress' orders, prohibiting all conversation.

I was about to leave when I caught a glimpse of his eyes: violet eyes, shadowed by the same peculiar eyelashes as the cherubim. I held his gaze for a second, until he replaced his damp lenses. Possessed by a strange foreboding, I stayed, keen to ask if he knew the blonde youth, and why he'd abandoned the lady to such a tragic destiny. Kneeling in front of the deceased—at whose face I couldn't bring myself to look—he remained all night, while I drifted off, hounded by sleep.

As the clock struck for mass, the police came for him. I could not discern the look in his eyes. He left, escorted by detectives who would never break his silence.

I waited until ten, when they carried her to the cemetery, the fat lady who never spoke to me once in twenty years. Only I attended the funeral.

When the estate auction ended, I bought the photo album. The group photograph had mysteriously disappeared, but turning the page I found a portrait of the blonde angel that the lady had had time to stick in, and who appeared in the uniform of the Windsor Castle guard.

*“A mi amada y cruel madre y a su criado, mi infortunado padre”*

(To my beloved and cruel mother and to her servant, my unfortunate father)

# “The Case of the Unfaithful Translator”

by José María Merino

translated by Erin Goodman

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## INTRODUCTION

“The Case of The Unfaithful Translator” is a short story by prolific Spanish writer and poet José María Merino, originally in the collection titled *Cuentos del Barrio de Refugio* (Ed. Alfaguara, 1994). Merino is known for his capacity to realistically capture the complex human experience from a personal perspective, while weaving in dreams, fantasy, and the creative experience, such as the idea of entering into fiction itself; this story is a prime example – Merino presents an intriguing insider’s perspective on the day-to-day activities of a translator, in this case one who succumbs to his temptation to manipulate the original text.

Considered one of the most prominent contemporary Spanish writers, Merino is best known for his novels and short stories, though he has also written several books of poetry, literary essays, books for children, and two memoirs. Merino has taught and conducted workshops and seminars in Spain and the United States at numerous institutions, including at Dartmouth College, the Universidad Complutense, Universidad Carlos III, and the Universidad Internacional Menéndez

y Pelayo (Santander). He has received many important awards and distinctions including the National Children's and Young People's Literature Award (1993) and the National Narrative Literature Award (2013). Merino was elected to the Real Academia Española in 2008.

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Erin Goodman holds a Certificate in English-Spanish Translation from the University of Massachusetts-Boston, an Ed.M. from Harvard University and a B.A. from Wellesley College. She translated the memoir *Prisoner of Pinochet: My Year in a Chilean Concentration Camp*, by Sergio Bitar (University of Wisconsin Press, 2017). Her translations of poetry and short stories have been published in *Poetry International Rotterdam* (2015), *spoKe* (2018), the *La Guagua Poetry Anthology* (Loom Press, 2019), and in the Australian literary journal *The Lifted Brow* (2020).

## THE CASE OF THE UNFAITHFUL TRANSLATOR

*A man was afflicted by a deep melancholy.* That was the direct and most natural translation, and the text went on without presenting a challenge, just like the rest of the pages in that chapter, which was less complicated than the previous ones. But the inertia that had kept him seated at his computer for an hour typing almost without pause was suddenly interrupted by the evocative figure of that melancholy man. Apparently, the original was referring to the madness of a person remorsefully recalling something that happened in their past, and the man was sketched in his imagination with the traces of recognizable signs.

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He pushed back his chair, lit a cigarette, and turned his gaze to the street. It was already past ten, but winter had cast an immense dark cloud over the city, giving the morning the appearance of endless twilight.

*Morning, you are the same dirty afternoon as yesterday, but I change your name to obscure this dark stillness from which nothing can save us,* he had written in one of those illuminations that sometimes came to him and that rarely developed into actual poems, but which he held onto with an inevitable sense of ownership. He kept this one in the same little room where he had written it, affixed with a thumbtack to the nearest wall, next to the calendar.

There was a crepuscular air outside, and the gas heater whirred next to the table, struggling against the invading cold that slipped through the cracks of the old house, in a neighborhood that, like all things humble, was built to withstand inclement weather.

His days as a student living in some of the neighborhood boarding houses were long behind him, and his future had turned out to be comprised of similar elements to the ones that had made up his daily reality in those years: cold; dankness; dark stairways that smelled of cooking; apartments that unknown inhabitants had redistributed until they were shrunken into tiny rooms with high ceilings, across from balconies behind which one could imagine a similar reality, also the result of a succession of interminable downsizings of rooms full of dilapidated furniture.

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Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner 009 (2020)

ISSN: 2694-2801 (online) 2694-281X (print)

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It was the same scene, although now he was the one paying the rent and he didn't live in a guesthouse but rather in what the building administrator—a skinny old man who wore a pinstripe suit and a gray hat, like some underworld character in one of those old detective films—euphemistically called a studio apartment.

He paid the rent just as he paid for everything required to lead that life that, after his youthful dreams, had been the only possible means of ensuring his independence. And in order to pay rent and everything he needed to subsist, he translated books.

Sometimes, contemplating how little he had progressed in life, he thought that perhaps it would have been better to have continued collecting the money that had been sent promptly at the end of each month from his home city, where his father had a small furniture factory that he would have inherited. But that modest rentier's life wouldn't have been possible either, since his detachment from the family business had been supplanted by the doting attention of a brother-in-law who, over time, had taken ownership of everything. And now that his parents were deceased, he had ultimately lost touch with that city of his childhood and youth.

54 But he wasn't necessarily unhappy to be the one financing his present austere lifestyle, which reminded him so much of his life as a student so long ago. He finished his cigarette and, turning his imagination away from the outline of the melancholy man, he brought his chair closer to the computer once again and continued effortlessly typing up the translation of the rest of the paragraph—*like all melancholy people, his spirit was fixed on a particular idea and for him this idea occasioned a continually renewed sadness*—when the telephone rang.

The answering machine was one of the few luxuries he allowed himself. With the same anxiety that he always felt upon hearing his own voice, he now heard it again: “this is so-and-so's number; if you'd like to leave a message, please do so after the tone.” Amaya's voice followed: “This is Amaya,” and right away he picked up the receiver, connected the call, and began to talk with her. Amaya had some questions about the proofs of a catalog he had translated and, after searching for his copy, he went about clarifying them.

When it seemed that the conversation was over, Amaya gave him some updates from the publishing house and, finally, told him that they had heard that another novel by Kate Courage would soon arrive. “Well, I'm letting you know that another Kate Courage novel is about to arrive,” she had said. “They're sending it to us on a disk because it's going to be published at the same time in I-don't-know-how-many countries. There seems to be quite a rush, so I'll send it to you as soon as I have it.”

“How much of a rush?” he had managed to respond, with an alarm that outwardly conveyed a strictly professional concern, because really he only had one book pending, but she reassured him: “Don’t worry, it’s not for tomorrow,” she said, “first they have to send it to me, and after I send it to you, have a look and we’ll talk.”

He was more irked than surprised by this news, because he had been expecting it for a long time and the fact that it had finally happened recalled the threatening premonition that those now-distant letters about the Kathleen Crossfield books had already dredged up. The feeling of unease that he’d had under control for so long became dislodged and took its place alongside anxiety, but he made an effort to keep calm and not let himself get carried away with panic.

The image of a disheveled old woman who was shaking out dish towels on one of the balconies in need of a paint job on the dirty façade across the way—an involuntary witness to his perplexity that cold, gray morning—managed to completely upend his desire to continue working and he decided to go out much earlier than he usually did, because although he liked to walk around the neighborhood during that time of day—when it seemed that some of the stillness and oblivion of the previous night lingered in the streets and usually the only people out and about were women and retirees—he normally didn’t do so, in order to turn his work into a real job, and so he stayed tethered to his computer as if he depended on an hourly rate and was bound to the schedules of other workers, only granting himself a twenty-minute break around eleven to take a quick walk during which he had a coffee and bought the newspaper, bread, and cigarettes.

On Corredera, next to the church that in past centuries had been a parish first belonging to the Portuguese and then to the Germans, several beggars began to gather in what by noon would become the long line for the charity lunch. Over time he had come to know the neighborhood quite well. The line forming at San Antonio upheld the pious ancestral tradition of Refugio, just like the hookers who, already swarming in the square a little further up, had exercised the oldest profession in the area since the Golden Age itself.

His was a neighborhood of prostitutes and poets. The prostitutes had moved in along with certain festivities in the back patios of the houses along San Bernardo Street, balancing out the grave severity of their facades. As for the poets, Quevedo had had a house there, and Rubén, Carrere, and Juan Ramón had lived there, and José Hierro was born on one of those streets.

Beyond the prostitutes’ block, groups of homeless people were camped out taking advantage of the shelter from the porticos, almost motionless among filthy blankets and large cardboard boxes. Paradoxically, this penury didn’t induce sorrow or repugnance in him, but rather a fatalistic

tranquility, and he accepted it because it was well matched with the deterioration of the buildings and the lack of street cleaning.

No longer assuming any nobility or pretense, nor a trace of durability, it all manifested in one of the true faces of the world, evolving naturally until becoming the gesture of a skeleton or the grimace of a skull.

Like every day, Nico the beggar approached him on the sidewalk, asking for a cigarette and giving his opinion about the weather. He listened attentively, but said goodbye right away and went around the large central trench where the benches and beds of bare earth were scattered, covered with innumerable dog droppings. Aligned in the center of a bookshop window, he suddenly came upon Kathleen Crossfield's books. He stopped, looked at the covers of all those novels that he had translated and thought that, precisely that morning, the unexpected and compact display of the American's books seemed to hold a mocking message specially addressed to him.

Ever since he had read the first of those novels, when he was commissioned to translate them, he had felt a belligerent antipathy toward the protagonist. As presented by her author, the detective Kate Courage—a nom de guerre that cloaked another, much more distinguished name—was a slender woman just over thirty, with honey-colored hair and huge, bright violet eyes and a beautiful complexion, who, besides being very cultured and speaking several languages (she came from an important Boston family and had been educated in the most distinguished all-female college in the East) was in excellent physical shape and could just as easily practice kempo-karate or aim a gun, win at fencing, ride a horse, navigate and sail a yacht or pilot a plane. On top of it all, she was funny, vivacious, cheerful, and seductive.

Such perfection—the main element of those detective novels full of academic scenes and educated conversations, in which few actual deaths occurred, and all of which were quite orderly—had already overwhelmed him in the first of the books, but it became insufferable when he found out that he would have to translate at least half a dozen more.

He was startled from his immobility by a reflection in the shop window and quickly shifted his position fearing being hit by a vehicle, before discovering that the reflection had been produced by a human figure that had just emerged suddenly from behind the large dumpster on the opposite sidewalk.

It was a fairly young man with light hair, wearing a blue coat. The man's hunched and elusive appearance made him think it was one of those passers-by that were often seen in the area, perhaps a frequenter of the soup kitchen. But this new character's eyes caught his attention—they were fixed on him with a clearly menacing expression. He assumed then that it was some drug addict in the

difficult throes of sensing his pleasant inner warmth dissipate, and he turned away from the window, hurrying on toward Gran Vía.

He mostly made his living by translating books, and he couldn't choose them according to which ones he deemed of potential literary or cultural interest. His lack of discernment when accepting originals, along with his quickly-executed, precise, and correct translations, were what made him sought-after by publishing houses, and he never wanted for work. But the translation of the first three novels featuring Kate Courage—*Tussle at the Symposium*, *Never on Sabbatical*, and *Too Many Blackbirds on Campus*—had been very unpleasant, made almost insufferable by how pretentious he found the main character, surely a reflection of the author's personality. The prospect of being forced to translate another of her adventures made him intuit the fastidious tedium he'd surely endure.

At first he had confessed his opinion to the person who was his professional interlocutor at the publishing house before Amaya started working there. However, his objections were met with a firm and almost distrustful disapproval. How was it possible that he wasn't interested in the Crossfield books? This author was a marvel of finesse, a font of lively and thrilling culture. Before dedicating herself exclusively to writing, she had worked as a professor at a famous university, was highly regarded in cultural circles, and was an essential figure in criminal narratives written by women. His interlocutor then concluded his defense with a look that was more condescending than understanding. He said at last that he supposed it must be quite difficult to enjoy a book when one was bound to the obligation of translating it within a short time frame, but those books are quality, true quality, and he had left with a sense of ridicule and even feeling a bit guilty, because perhaps he was really just envious of the confidence the author conveyed through her protagonist, apparently convinced of her writing and actions, whilst in his own poetic illuminations—which he had never shown to anyone, not even Marta—the only thing he managed to reflect, as his strongest personality trait, was a disturbing and increasingly genuine bafflement at the world.

But after leafing through those novels that the editor so defended, he set aside his reservations and regrets: surely, this was one of those authors who had the audacity to claim to understand the ultimate meaning of things, and Kate Courage was just one key among many others that to him only indicated blind and self-satisfied petulance.

On the Gran Vía, the sleaze of the neighborhood was eclipsed, although misery's aftermath persisted in the form of a beggar squatting behind his succinct proclamation. He walked for almost two hours through the neighborhoods on the other side and discovered that increasing numbers of citizens seemed delirious: people talking to themselves or guys asking for alms, offering bewildering pretexts. A woman with a summoning look blocked his way to show him a blurry photograph. When

he managed to dodge her, he saw that just a few paces behind him, the man with the threatening eyes who had emerged from behind the dumpster seemed to be following his same route. He decided it was time to go home and he returned quickly, giving up the idea of going to the market at the Plaza de los Mostenses to do some shopping.

It was while he was translating the fourth of the Kate Courage novels—*The Case of the Distracted Dean*—that he had managed to find a way to turn that boring, cloying work into a fun and stimulating activity. Filled with compassion for the shy and kind Harvey, an ugly literature professor, the sweet Kate gives herself over to him one night, after a long and fruitless search for the microfilm of a manuscript (it was one of the clues to locate the kidnapper-turned-murderer of a newly hired female professor—a doctoral student who had killed her out of sheer envy while he was in the midst of completing his thesis). In the original, the scene was constructed to evoke a mixture of humor and tenderness, with some poetic evocations, like the reference to the sweet consummation of the loving encounter between Beauty and the Beast.

58           Conjuring up synonyms to describe the rotundness of Harvey, whose gratitude toward Kate’s generosity in the original had made him babble lots of *Oh my God* and *Good Heavens*, he had the idea of nuancing the scene in a grotesque manner and discovered by chance that if he used certain synonyms, the phrasing of the dialogue could, to the reader’s imagination, seem more lewd than tender. With joy and pure playfulness, he continued to perfect the translation of the scene from that perspective, until he attained what he thought was an acceptable result, whose ambiguity led to obscene reverberations, a very funny passage that only appeared to respect the author’s desire for balance in delicately framing the copulation scene.

The adaptation required effort, but he was so satisfied with his achievement that he didn’t resist the temptation to use it as if it were the literal translation of that fragment of the novel. And from then on he continued to treat Kate Courage in a similar way, until her brilliance hinted at arrogance, her boldness became recklessness and her worldliness, pedantry. He also found a way for her use of sex as a sincere form of human communication to instead come across as vulgar promiscuity.

It wasn’t easy work and it forced him to devote more hours than he usually did to this literary genre, but he did it with pleasure, almost with passion, because the difficulty lay mainly in attaining a prudent and measured novel in which, despite the nuances of his translation, Kate Courage would continue to be a cultured, intelligent, elegant, and courageous protagonist, who at the end of each plot brilliantly elucidates mysteries and solves problems. The challenge was directed to his own imagination and creativity and consisted of subtly transforming the Kate Courage the author

had intended into a less idealized character, even seeking to highlight with irony those traits that got on his nerves: the distinction that the fictional detective owed to her high-brow family origin and her apparently encyclopedic knowledge.

And it turned out that, after having translated two new Kate Courage novels along those lines, no one, neither the editor nor any potential readers, made accusations of having noticed differences between the translation and the original. Thus his initial abhorrence of the American's books turned into interest and he looked forward to the new installments in the series, knowing that his translations would provide him with many delightful moments of authentic literary creation, like when he was tasked with translating a truly quality text.

When he arrived at home and went to pick up the mail, he looked for Toribio in the shadows of the foyer, climbed the creaking stairs, entered his small flat, and tried to work for a while before lunch. But although the passage he was working on wasn't complicated, he found that he couldn't concentrate. The news about the arrival of Crossfield's new book had deeply displeased him and the memory of what had happened continued to cause him discomfort and angst, to the point that he had not been able to discard the correspondence he kept about the matter, because those letters held that mysterious element of truth, which cannot be destroyed without causing permanent damage in its estimation.

When seven Kate Courage books were already on the market and he celebrated by secretly rejoicing in his impunity and the mastery of the metamorphosis he had achieved, a letter sent by a certain Professor Valdez had arrived via the publishing house:

*I have personally met Kathleen Crossfield, for whom I feel admiration and deep affection, and she has shown me the translations that you have done of her detective series featuring Kate Courage. I believe that my experience as a professor in the Spanish Department of this University gives me some authority in the field, but the reason for my letter is not to judge the formal aspects of your translation—which is too often weighed down by the inertia of the original construction—but to refer to other more subtle ones, where it's not so much skill and knowledge of the respective languages that are at play; any professional who undertakes the translation of a literary work must have unwavering respect for the author's express will to determine the nature and character of their protagonists. Mr. Lugán, I am unfamiliar with your conduct in the translation of other books, but with Kathleen Crossfield's you have acted as an unfair and perverse translator. You have turned the intelligent, brave, and liberal Kate Courage, an unforgettable character in her genre, into a rather stupid, crazed, and dogmatic being. I have carefully analyzed the books and I have understood that the manipulation has been primarily in the choice of adjectives used to portray her or to describe her*

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Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner 009 (2020)

ISSN: 2694-2801 (online) 2694-281X (print)

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*attitudes, or in the notions that you have put in her mouth throughout the abundant dialogues in the novels. You have created a distance between the narrator and the detective that is not in the original, certainly with the objective of ridiculing her, and which has no doubt managed to undermine and malign her. I insist that all of this is subtle and it would be difficult to prove in court, because, in short, translation is not a science, nor a technique that relies on safe and immutable methods, but to me it is clear that you have searched for synonyms, phrases, and expressive approaches that lent themselves to distorting the image of Kate Courage that appears in the original texts. Your conduct is reprehensible. As I am aware of Dr. Crossfield's sensitivity, I am sure that the knowledge of your betrayal will be very painful for her, but I cannot leave her in the dark about an issue that so directly affects one of the inalienable moral rights that she possesses. I know that she will be outraged and I hope that she will immediately communicate her outrage to her Spanish editors and that you will get what you deserve, which, in my opinion, should consist, above all, in your immediate distancing from a profession that cannot be based in actions such as the one you have perpetrated, but in the utmost respect for the original text and absolute fidelity to the author's designs.*

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Reading the letter brought him back to a reality that he had forgotten, enraptured in his secret game, and he clearly saw the seriousness of the matter and the unpleasant consequences it could have for him, in the event that Crossfield filed a complaint. Throughout that whole day he was thinking of possible solutions, and finally he decided to tell Marta. He called her to set a date and she invited him to dinner the following Friday.

“But you have to take me to the movies,” she said, reaffirming the habitual reciprocity that was one of the conditions of their arrangement.

The relationship between him and Marta retained a kind of camaraderie between classmates, and although they slept together once in a while, it couldn't be said that their bond had the characteristics of a courtship, but rather of an affectionate and sporadic partnership between loners. Among the confidences they shared about their respective jobs, he had told her how irritating he found the Crossfield books—which she didn't think were so terrible—and then about the manipulation with which he had transformed his initial annoyance into a creative game. To Marta the forgery had seemed worthy of reproach, and although she didn't usually opine on his affairs unless he asked her directly, on that occasion she told him that he shouldn't continue with those inaccurate translations.

“It's unprofessional, to say the least.”

“Nonsense!” he had said. “It's a sort of experimental translation. Why shouldn't we translators experiment, like authors do?”

“You're supposed to guarantee fidelity to the text, so you convey the author's intentions as faithfully as possible,” she countered.

“The author’s intentions?” he had exclaimed. “And why should it be assumed that we can clearly deduce the author’s intentions? The meaning of words is often equivocal and almost always loaded with ambiguity.”

“Look,” Marta replied, “I think that in these novels what the author wants is clear, just like the way that she has profiled her character.”

“That’s what you think,” he argued, “but perhaps deep down, Crossfield’s will is actually to describe Kate Courage with the nuances that I’ve come up with. At the end of the day, the results of the character’s actions don’t change, and her successes don’t become failures. Perhaps a professor as distinguished as she, with such refined acquaintances, doesn’t dare to make explicit all the turbid (or simply vulgar) details that one could imagine about the character.”

“I don’t like this at all,” Marta had stated sharply, ending the conversation. “So if you’re not going to stop doing it, don’t tell me about it.”

The Friday after Professor Valdez’s letter arrived, Marta had the delicacy of not reminding him of her old objections. They had watched a fairly boring movie and then they’d gone to her house for dinner. Over dinner, he read her the professor’s letter, but Marta said nothing. They did the dishes and poured some whiskey, but Marta still didn’t offer her opinion.

“So, what do you think?” he finally asked her, because Marta’s silence was making his premonitions about the potential problems he could face even more ominous.

“Well,” said Marta, “let’s go to bed for a bit and then we’ll talk. I think you’ve gotten yourself into a big mess.”

Marta’s advice had consisted of what he, in spite of his disgust, thought he ought to do to avoid jeopardizing his professional career if the grievance were to come to light, and he decided to write immediately to the professor and to the author herself, claiming innocence.

Respectfully, with a humility that seemed to him quite disgusting, he answered the professor, imploring her not to interpret his translations so unfavorably, for at no point had there been any intention on his part to modify the original and much less to falsify it, adding any supplementary irony that he, perhaps mistakenly, seemed to find in the works by the great writer Kathleen Crossfield. That he had been doing his job as a translator for more than twenty years, translating many books of poetry, fiction, and essays from English and French into Spanish, for the best publishers, without ever having received any kind of complaint. That he was, however, willing to give all kinds of explanations and technical justifications to Ms. Crossfield, or to whomever it might be necessary. And, as a show of good will, and of his regret for any undesirable modifications slipped

into the translation unconsciously and against his will, he would even personally finance, out of his own pocket, any rectifications deemed necessary in possible future editions, despite the fact that an exact correspondence between languages was practically impossible, as no doubt the professor knew much better than he did, especially if they belong to different linguistic subgroups, as was the case, et cetera, et cetera.

In the letter to Kathleen Crossfield he was even more careful and his humility bordered on abjection, because after repeating the same arguments, excuses, and promises as in the letter to Professor Valdez, he declared himself an enthusiastic admirer of Kate Courage—a fascinating literary character full of vigor and overwhelming likeability, who deserves to be in the gallery of immortals, et cetera, et cetera.

He sent both letters via an expensive and expeditious service and, shamefully aware that he had reacted like a poor devil, for a few days he anxiously waited to be summoned by the publisher to justify his conduct, anticipating a complaint. He carefully reviewed all the books, trying to defend as solidly as possible those linguistic alternatives that he had chosen when he characterized the protagonist Kate Courage and give life to her adventures in the Spanish language, but he received no news, and although he spoke a couple of times with the person who, before Amaya arrived, had handled translations at the publishing house, there was no hint that the anticipated charge had been made.

Finally, one day he received a letter from the United States, apparently sent by Crossfield herself, and ill at ease, he prepared to read it. With concise displeasure, the author acknowledged receipt of his justifications and added that she was trying not to worry too much about his betrayal—about which she had already heard in detail from her friend Professor Valdez—considering the limited diffusion that the Spanish market implied for her books, within the vast world in which her work was known and appreciated. That's why she hadn't worried about the gender of the translator, which in the case of important countries, such as Germany or France, was contractually required to be a woman.

*For now, I don't even consider it essential to file a complaint against you. Furthermore, your pathetic actions as a resentful man and a true traduttore traditore have given me an idea for a new book, in which there appears a character like you, an unfaithful translator whose death—because the role corresponding to such a character in my novel's plot will be that of the victim—will be meticulously and effectively investigated by Kate. Not only will I not ban you, but I may even consider the possibility that you translate the book, and I will do so if I am able to clear up my serious doubts about your true and correct understanding of my language, and if you are still alive at that point.*

The shame and discomfort of that episode remained fully present for him, and his concerns had been revived with the same intensity as before. Unable to placate his restlessness enough to continue working anymore before lunch, he abandoned his efforts and, after leafing through the newspaper in just as distracted and nervous a manner, he ate mechanically and was quiet for a while sitting in front of the leftovers of his little meal, until he had finished the bottle of wine.

That same afternoon he called Amaya to find out whether the disk had arrived, but she had no doubt forgotten their conversation that morning.

“What disk?”

When he told her he meant the new Crossfield novel, Amaya laughed.

“Sorry, you misunderstood me,” she clarified, “we received a fax telling us that they’re going to send it to us, but they haven’t done so yet. I’ll send it to you with a courier as soon as I have it, don’t worry.”

The next day, when he went out on his morning routine to get bread and cigarettes, after a few hours spent barely managing to improve his poor efforts from the previous evening, Toribio leaned out the window to ask if his visitor had already left.

“What visitor?” he asked.

Toribio, taking his habitual dimwitted air of distrust to an extreme, explained that a young man, possibly a foreigner, had arrived about an hour earlier and had asked about him, where he lived, and if he would be home at that time.

“I answered him, he went up, and I haven’t seen him come back down.”

He shrugged with indifference, so as to not reveal a baseless fear, but he understood that the human shape that he thought he had glimpsed on the landing of the floor above his must belong to the man Toribio was talking about.

“I thought I saw someone on the stairway above me, but I haven’t had any visitors,” he answered as he went out.

As always, Nico was in the square next to the kiosk, and came trotting up to him.

“Here, give me a cig, and let me ask you something. Do you know a blonde guy with crazy eyes, who must be a foreigner?”

“I haven’t a clue,” he said, trying to show good humor. “I know quite a few people with crazy eyes—foreigners, Spaniards, and independence-seekers alike.”

“When you came by the square yesterday, after we talked, a guy who is definitely not from here approached me to ask, in very poor Spanish, if I knew you and if you were a book transferor, that’s exactly what he said,” explained the beggar.

“And what did you tell him?” he asked.

“What did you want me to say? I said no, of course, that I didn’t know you or anything about you.”

“Very good, Nico, you’ve earned another cigarette!” he exclaimed with poise.

“Looks like it still won’t rain,” Nico informed him. “The taverns are screwed, but it’s fine for those of us who make our living this way.”

The news that a strange man was asking about him gave more consistency to his unease, which aligned with his intuitions. Through the mechanism that determined the logic of his fear, he attributed the unknown interrogator to the appearance of that individual he had discovered watching him the previous day next to the dumpster on Silva Street in front of the bookstore, and who he had sensed again following him along his walk. His fearful suspicions became more intense when, upon returning home, Toribio called out to him and then left his nook to speak with him, his slow and tense gestures giving away the gravity of the situation.

“The guy was there!” he exclaimed. “I went up to take a look and he was still there, I would say crouched, as if waiting for something. I called out to him and he took off like a greyhound, the bastard almost knocked me down the stairs.”

In the afternoon he worked on translating the French essay with unusual dedication, more to take his mind off the forthcoming Crossfield novel and the presence of the mysterious visitor than to make progress on the metaphor of the melancholy man, but his concern made it very difficult to work, and he often lifted his gaze away from the book and screen to let it land on the balconies across the way, where the objects left there—potted plants or junk—signaled the disposition of their tenants.

An unexpected greenish flutter caught his attention and he spotted the small shape of two parakeets perched on one of the balconies. After a while he watched them fly away with a clumsy quivering of the wings and they disappeared from his sight. They had certainly escaped some captivity that had nonetheless been their only means for survival, and when he considered that freedom that would inevitably lead to starvation and cold, he once again surrendered fervently to his work.

That night he didn’t go out for dinner, nor did he leave the apartment during the following two days except to go down to the entranceway to get the mail and ask Toribio to buy bread and

cigarettes, pretending that he had come down with a cold. He tried to justify himself with the good results of his translation work, which that isolation had favored, but he was so ashamed of his fear that he didn't say anything to Marta when she called to propose a date the following weekend. Finally, after those two days, he decided to venture outside to overcome his caution that had all the signs of irrational cowardice.

He went out to buy groceries for the week and, although he stayed alert to avoid any surprises, nothing abnormal happened, nor did he come across that individual who was apparently so interested in him. That evening he confirmed that the previous days' feverish work had drastically advanced the translation, and he set out to dinner at one of the inexpensive restaurants in the area. He ate well and then walked toward the Gran Vía to get a drink, more as an impulse of exorcism rather than celebration.

When he was returning home, someone blocked his path, next to some smelly garbage cans. He understood right away that it was the same figure with those disturbing wandering eyes that he had seen watching him the morning that he had discovered the frieze of Kathleen Crossfield's novels in the bookstore window. The individual was wielding a large knife, like a machete.

"Stay calm," he said. "I'll give you everything I have on me, even my jacket, if you want it."

The other man didn't seem to hear him, and the way he held his torso and bent his arm with the knife clearly indicated that he was going to attack no matter what. He broke free, managing to dodge the knife and, pushing the aggressor, he forced him to follow through with his arm-swing, lose his balance and fall. Then he pushed over the garbage cans and ran with all his might, searching his pockets for his house keys. He felt so pumped up that as he ran he seemed to fly over the damp ground, tearing through the dizzying winter fog.

The flat was very cold and he put several blankets on the bed, but he couldn't warm up. That night he hardly slept, unable to stop thinking about the aggression he had suffered. In all the years he had lived in the neighborhood, he had been confronted with threats a couple of times, by young drug addicts looking for money, but never with the deadly aggression this individual had shown. After living for so long in the neighborhood, people knew him well enough that he could walk around the old streets without having to take too many precautions.

In his concern, he associated the attack with the news that the latest Kathleen Crossfield novel was about to arrive, in which the victim was apparently a translator, and he tried to figure out how the foreigner who had been asking about him and his violent aggressor fit into the equation, but at the same time he understood that it was absurd to establish a link between the American author and that shifty-eyed knife-wielder. No doubt a dangerous madman had ended up in the

neighborhood, and he should notify the police in order to prevent repeated aggressions or some barbarous crime that the guy could commit. But when he finally fell asleep in the wee hours of the morning, he dreamt of his assailant's ferocious eyes and he thought that, to describe their gleam and his attitude, he could use those very adept simple and direct adjectives that Kate Courage's creator was so fond of.

The manuscript finally arrived on Wednesday morning and it seemed to him very short, compared to the other novels in the series, but he began to read it with the avidity of someone who intuits that the message he just received contains something of mortal importance.

The literal translation of the title could be *The Case of the Unfaithful Translator*, and from the first pages, this time Kate Courage appears in places that are a far cry from her usual haunts—some orderly New England campus among forest-covered hills, small inns and old mansions. This time she was in the capital of a southern European country, with dirty, noisy streets that smelled of frying oil.

Kate was passing through that city on her way to an important conference on Egyptology—she was a huge fan of the subject and had inherited from a great-aunt a rich collection of objects from Tell-el-Amarna—and during a brief stroll through the center she had found, displayed in the shop window of a bookstore, the translations into that country's language of books written by a professor that was a good friend of hers, whose protagonist was also an attractive and intelligent woman, and an amateur detective.

Precisely this language figured among the languages Kate had mastered. She bought several of the novels, because although she had read them in their original versions, she was eager to reread them in that country's language. She began reading that very night at bedtime, quickly becoming irritated because the translator was apparently a man, and had allowed himself to manipulate the English text in such a way that, although all the twists and turns of the plot were respected, the lovely detective had become some sort of ridiculous hoyden.

Very upset, early the next day Kate Courage decided to take advantage of a free morning before her flight out to try to meet that translator and, representing her friend, express her dejection. With her characteristic dynamism, it only took Kate just over an hour to find the translator: after several calls to the publishing house, she demanded that they provide his address. With the same resoluteness, after failing to contact him by telephone, she went to his home.

When Kate arrived at the building—the man lived on the second floor of a dilapidated house—a police patrol car was parked in front, and two paramedics were loading a stretcher with a body on it into an ambulance. Interested in what might have happened, Kate pestered the police until

she learned that the man they were putting in the ambulance was precisely the translator she had come to see.

There the manuscript ended, and an unfinished sentence made it clear that the book was incomplete. He called Amaya to ask her to send the rest of the original to him, but she was quite surprised at his request—she was sure that the text printed on those pages was the only document on the disk that had arrived from the United States.

“I also thought it was very short, but honestly I didn’t even look at it, because I knew you were going to read it...” she said.

She promised him she would look into it immediately, and a while later it was she who phoned him, to confirm that at the publishers they hadn’t misplaced any portion of the manuscript and that they had sent a fax to request the part that was surely missing.

After the abrupt interruption in his reading he tried to forget the manuscript and continue working on a pending translation, but he continued to feel very cold and he was perplexed. Given what he had read, that novel was quite strange. On the one hand, this Kate Courage character had behaved more like the one he had recreated in his translations than the Kate originally imagined by Kathleen Crossfield, because Kate had expressed, in his opinion, sincere and utter contempt toward the country in which she found herself and toward its people, which was inappropriate for a character that had been created based on pretenses of intelligent tolerance. And she was impertinent and arrogant in the dialogues when she spoke, both in her comminatory search for the unfaithful translator and in her interactions with the police officers who responded to her interpellations with stunned docility. On the other hand, the description of the downtown neighborhoods and their toponymy were extraordinarily similar to that same city he lived in, as if Crossfield knew those places perfectly well.

Such speculations would eventually absorb him, and he was unable to devote his attention to anything else. But although he had turned on all the heaters in the apartment, the cold was already unbearable and little by little he understood that, just as the much-anticipated Kate Courage novel seemed like something he had dreamt up, the cold that was gripping him had nothing to do with the temperature of his flat.

He finally opened his eyes: he was lying on the ground on the street, among the scattered garbage bags, and he felt a very intense pain in his gut. Then he recalled the whole sequence of the attack: the appearance of the man with the mad look, the shininess of the blade in his hand, the threatening arc

of his body. He hadn't managed to dodge the stabbing and when he fell to the ground the pain continued, like a deep, piercing burning. His assailant had fled on foot after pushing the trash cans on top of him. While he lost consciousness, he had imagined that, like in the story by Bierce, he had quickly returned home. He tried to move but he couldn't, and he had no voice. I'm going to die, he thought, and all the food in the fridge will spoil and I'll never find out how the latest novel by Kate Courage really ended.

But he didn't die. The garbage men, who came round in the early hours of the morning, found his body and called the police. The doctor at a nearby clinic performed first aid and then an ambulance transported him to the hospital, where they operated right away. He was in critical condition, but soon he began to recover.

When he was able to receive visitors, Marta brought him an envelope that she had picked up from Toribio, sent from the United States. It was one of those priority envelopes imprinted with the huge head of a multicolored eagle and he opened it with clumsy eagerness.

Inside there was a brief and urgent letter from Kathleen Crossfield, warning him to guard against a possible attack. An unstable student of Professor Valdez, fanatic and violent, who for a long time had concealed the true nature of his character and impulses, had heard through certain confidences of the aforementioned professor, of the transformations to which the protagonist Kate Courage, of whom he was a fervent admirer, had been subjected by the Spanish translator. Professor Valdez had confided on the subject of the latest Crossfield novel, which would be published simultaneously in the United States and Europe, apparently triggering a certain madness in this student. And, as she had just learned from an impassioned note that the student had left under Professor Valdez's pillow, he was planning to travel to Europe to carry out, with his own hands, what he considered a fair and even poetic restorative justice.

*The student has disappeared and we fear that he may have gone abroad, searching for you with aggressive intentions. Obviously I have informed the police, and I am informing you, so that you are forewarned if the vindictive dementia of this young man comes to pass.*

That same afternoon Amaya came to visit him. As a gift she brought him a book about ships and navigation that they had just published and she updated him on the past few days, including that the new Kathleen Crossfield novel had arrived.

"I'm reading it and it's quite entertaining. It's about a slightly eccentric translator who gets away scot-free with twisting the sense of the original texts in order to ridicule the characters that he doesn't like."

“How is that possible?” he asked, throwing Marta a sly look.

Amaya shrugged.

“Hey, it’s a novel. Anything’s possible in fiction, and this one is very well done. The translations scrupulously respect the originals in the plot development, but they distort the traits of some of the characters. The translations keep coming out and nobody realizes it, until the translator stumbles upon the novels of a vindictive author, who ends up finding out what he’s done and decides to off him.”

“She kills him?” he asked, feeling very weak.

“Not directly,” Amaya said. “She manages to recruit a young psychopath who’s an aspiring writer, to whom she feeds the idea as if it were the subject for a novel that she proposes that he write, assuring him that she’ll help him get it published. Kate Courage discovers the motives for the crime thanks to her language proficiency and linguistic erudition. There are some pretty funny passages about ambiguity in communication across different languages. And in this book, Kate Courage is more unbridled than in the others. I’m already halfway through.”

For a few moments he was too stunned to react and then he asked, out of pure habit, how much time there was to complete the translation.

“I already told you it’s a rush job,” Amaya said, getting up to leave, “but don’t worry, this one isn’t for you. Crossfield has sent a note requesting that this book be translated by a woman, what do you make of that?”

“That’s the best possible ending,” he managed to say, while Amaya looked at him with surprise before leaving.

Marta and Amaya’s visits weren’t the only ones of the afternoon. After his IV was replaced, two police officers appeared. One of them showed him the photo of a shady individual, a headshot and a profile, and asked him if he recognized the man.

“That’s him,” he said without hesitation. “He was following me in the neighborhood and that night he attacked me.”

“We’ve got him already,” said one of the officers. “He’s a very dangerous criminal who was on the run. He must have really gone crazy, because that same night he also stabbed a waiter at Fuyma and a cashier at the Santo Domingo metro station, without stealing anything from either of the victims.”

“He isn’t American?” he asked, and the police officers gave him a strange look.

“Why would he be American?”

He felt scared again and was very tired, but he gave them the letter from Crossfield and translated what was, for him, the most important part—the warning that an American psychopath could be looking for him to kill him. And it was disturbing, he insisted, making an effort to fight through the weariness that was pushing him toward sleep, because a foreign guy had been asking for him in the neighborhood.

“I suppose we can take the letter,” said one of the officers, and when he nodded they said goodbye quickly.

Marta also prepared to leave, but after kissing his cheeks she stared at him inquisitively.

“Are you worried?”

He was confused, but he shook his head.

“Here you’re very safe,” Marta said. “And in the meantime they’ll find that American, if it’s true that he’s come and it’s not some macabre joke by Crossfield. Anyway, if he had come and wanted to harm you, he would already have done so, since he had been lurking around for so many days and he already knew who you were. Don’t worry, Antonio, the thing with the guy who assaulted you is just a case of bad luck.”

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He had a bit of a fever and, given the restlessness caused by his bad dreams, he woke up two or three times in the night, alarmed. Like trying to keep his balance while the floor shifted beneath him, each time he had to recover the order of his thoughts, scattered among the memories of the real events and the hallucinations of delirium, where some of the scenes from those novels he’d translated as if he were the character’s author also began to resemble reality.

In the early hours of the next morning, after the doctor’s visit, one of the nurses came over to him.

“Are you awake?” she asked unnecessarily, because it was obvious that he was. “You have a visitor. She has a special pass.”

Before he could turn around, the woman entered his field of vision. She was very beautiful, with honey-colored hair. When she was next to the bed he could smell her exquisite perfume and saw that her eyes were an unusual violet color. The woman spoke in a low voice, in good Spanish.

“First of all, let me explain who I am,” the woman said, and he understood that he already knew, accepting that his confusion was beginning to be the only possible reality.

# Miguel Hernández' Speech to his Companions in the Ocaña Jail

*translated by* Constance Marina

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## INTRODUCTION

Miguel Hernández' speech to his companions in the Ocaña Jail was inspired by a meal his friends prepared for him on his release from twenty-five days of solitary confinement. Known as the People's Poet, Miguel Hernández fought on the side of the Republic in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Committed from the beginning of the conflict to defend the democratically elected government, he composed many poems for the soldiers while fighting alongside them in the trenches. Upon the defeat of the Spanish Republic by Franco's forces, Hernández was arrested and jailed as a political prisoner. Miguel Hernández died in prison in 1942 of untreated tuberculosis. This speech was delivered one year and three months before his death. While its tone contrasts with the intimate tone of the poems he composed in prison—the *Cancionero y romancero de ausencias*, a poetic diary of the poet's struggle with loss and injustice—its theme affirms the same principles. As in the *Cancionero*, in his prison speech Hernández decries man's inhumanity to man, yet he rises above his

hatred to plead for positive, fraternal cooperation among Spaniards. Likewise, in the *Cancionero*, the poet expresses the triumph of love over hate and intimates his belief that future generations will build a better, more productive, and peaceful Spain. This speech has appeared in its entirety in only one publication in Spanish, the memoirs of his widow, Josefina Manresa, in *Recuerdos de la Viuda de Miguel Hernández*, Ediciones de la Torre, Madrid, 1980. The publisher has given permission for the online publication of this English translation of the speech, as well as of extracts of a letter from the poet to his wife, which are included in the footnotes. An excerpt of the speech was published in José Luis Ferris' biography, *Miguel Hernández: pasiones, cárcel y muerte de un poeta*, Ediciones Temas de Hoy, Madrid, 2002. Ferris' book was translated into English by Grant Moss and published by Edwin Mellon in 2018. The entire speech has never been translated into English.

## INTRODUCTION

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Constance Marina holds a PhD in Romance Languages and Literatures from Harvard University. She has taught at Boston College and Regis College and worked as a professional legal interpreter and translator. Currently, she is preparing an English translation of Miguel Hernández' *Cancionero y romancero de ausencias* or *Songs and Ballads of Absence*.

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## MIGUEL HERNÁNDEZ' SPEECH TO HIS COMPANIONS IN THE OCAÑA JAIL<sup>1</sup>

December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1940

As you know, comrades in suffering, fatigue, and longing, the word “homage” has the taint of a public statue and bourgeois vanity. I don’t think any of us has tried to pay homage to anyone of us here today, as we gather with mouthwatering satisfaction to eat a family meal.<sup>2</sup> This gathering is about something else. And I don’t want this meal to give rise to words foreign to our revolutionary way of being. This meal is a just reward for the many meritorious deeds performed by one of us during the twenty-five days that he spent by himself, with the patience of the dead, like a specter, over there, in the hereafter of this prison.<sup>3</sup> The hunger that I’ve brought from that ghostly afterlife to this other real life as a prisoner: the hunger that I’ve brought and that never leaves me ever, well deserves an offering the size of a cow. But I must say that, as a poet, I’ve noticed the absence of bay leaves in the seasoning. Apart from that, the absence of laurel<sup>4</sup> doesn’t matter since for my temples

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<sup>1</sup> Translator’s note: Miguel was admitted into the Ocaña Adult Reformatory on November 28, 1940. This was the eleventh jail in which he’d been held and according to prison rules all prisoners transferred from one jail to another had to pass through a period of solitary confinement before joining the rest of the prison population. This and the other footnotes to the speech were composed by the translator.

<sup>2</sup> Translator’s note: In the letter to his wife Josefina, dated January 1, 1941, Miguel wrote, “when I got out of the cell, the friends who were waiting for me greeted me with a meal that was more like a huge banquet, and in addition to turrón, ham, cakes, cheese and fruit, there were small cigars and English cigarettes, and café mocha. In a few days you’ll receive the complete menu and you’ll see the names of those friends I was with, people I knew from before the war and also during it.”

<sup>3</sup> Translator’s note: In this same letter to his wife Josefina, cited above, Miguel wrote, “There’s been no other reason for my being out of touch but the transfer. It’s what they call in prison-speak, the *period*, like a certain mishap in women. I have spent twenty-five days completely alone, in a cell that was not very warm to say the least, without being able to speak with anyone....”

<sup>4</sup> Translator’s note: “Laurel” in Spanish is both the tree and the leaf that is used as a condiment, in English a “bay leaf.” A crown of laurel is a sign of victory, and in Greek mythology Apollo is represented wearing a laurel wreath on his head.

I'll always prefer some noble grey hair. Let's agree then, that today, I've been given a pretext to affirm, over a sound and nutritious meal, our need to collaborate fraternally in all aspects and in every dimension and deprivation of our lives. Today when our people are experiencing, those able to experience it, the most delicate and difficult trial of their existence, which is also the most instructive and challenging test of their mettle, I want to toast with you. Let's toast for the happiness of our people: for that which most closely approximates collective happiness. As you know, it's essential that we toast. And we have neither wine nor glasses. But now, at this very instant, we can raise our fists, mentally, clandestinely, and bump them against each other. There is no glass that can hold the only drink that fits into a fist without breaking: hatred. The overwhelming hatred that we feel for these walls that represent so much injustice: the hatred that spills from our fists over these walls, and that will spill. The hatred with its energetic life force that illuminates the face, and the stare, and the horizons of the worker.

But we will take utmost care that our hatred not be driven by instinct and unbridled passion. That primal hatred leads only to the jungle. And our hatred is not the tiger that destroys: it is the hammer that builds. Let us toast then.

# “The Guerrilla Fighter” *and* “May as Well Call it Quits”

by Albalucía Ángel Marulanda

translated by Daniel Steele Rodríguez

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## INTRODUCTION

Albalucía Ángel Marulanda (1939- ) is a celebrated author in Colombia, where her writing is considered vitally important as a historic testimony of one of the nation’s most violent periods, La Violencia (1948-1958). Her works embody a feminist perspective and wrestle with topics such as women’s rights and Colombian history. Her most recognized novel, *Estaba la pájara pinta sentada en el verde limón*, was awarded the prize *Vivencias de Cali* (1975).

Albalucía Ángel has reached many generations of readers in her country. Her texts are recognized for their capacity to evoke traditional Colombian culture and for emphasizing the perspectives of underrepresented actors in society. They are valuable fonts of polysemy and

intertextuality, recoding the idiomatic expressions of her home country and transforming them into literary experiments. The range of voices embedded in her fictionalized accounts is an especially important source of diversity during a challenging time for the country, as Colombia confronts issues of historical memory and demilitarisation. Additionally, Ángel has used her voice to support other Latin American female writers and to advocate for women's rights. She has continually embraced a female form of expression. In 2006, the Third Conference on Colombian Writers was dedicated to her work and historical contributions in challenging gender stereotypes.

The two short stories selected for translation, *El guerrillero* and *Apagá y vámonos*, are found in her collection of short stories *¡Oh gloria inmarcesible!* (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1979), which brings to life sketches of Colombian life in various regions of the country. The pastiche-like stories critique the corruption, drug trade, and violence which underlie Colombian society, even as the country is advertised as an idyllic vacation spot. The themes of these stories are as prominent today as they were forty years ago. *El guerrillero* narrates the experience of a woman who must reclaim her autonomy in the face of reprisals and sexual violence. To this day, guerrilla struggles rage on in rural areas; however, whereas in Ángel's story there is a measure of sympathy for the resistance fighter—an idealistic and romantic figure—, today the guerrillas are decoupled from their origins in the student-led protest movements of the sixties and are instead linked to the drug trade and human trafficking. *Apagá y vámonos*, on the other hand, is a stream of consciousness narrative of a union leader's grievances against a deeply flawed society. It is a breathless barrage of recriminations which transports the reader *in situ*, as if she were listening to the narrator speak while sipping on a 'tinto' (black coffee). The recent wave of protests across Chile and Colombia (2019) echo these sentiments, as the public took to the streets to denounce political corruption and price hikes.

As with many female Latin American writers from her generation, Ángel's work has not been disseminated in the way it truly deserves. In presenting these short stories for publication, it is hoped that her prose will reach a wider English-speaking audience and that Colombia's history, culture and literature be shared with others around the world.

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Daniel Steele Rodríguez (1991-) is a bilingual speaker of English and Spanish. He was born and raised in Spain but spent his adolescent and college years in California. He graduated from UC Berkeley with a bachelor's degree in Spanish Literature, and currently lives in London, where he continues to write and translate short stories. In 2018 he won a local short story contest in Santander, Spain, the *Premio José Hierro*, and in 2019 he obtained first prize in the Spanish category of the *Energbeia* awards in Matera, Italy.

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*To the prophet Gonzalo,  
wherever he may be.*

## THE GUERRILLA FIGHTER

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You'll get what's coming to you, Felicidad Mosquera, when they turn up armed with blades, barking out where's he hiding, just to get you to confess. They'll prod you. They'll force you to betray him 'cause if you don't we'll snatch your old folks, like they did to your chum Cleta two days ago, or they'll burn your hands in the fire like they did to Calixto Peñalosa, or they'll slash open your belly after all of 'em have used your body. That's how it'll go down, Felicidad. You can bet on it. Had you fled with him, you wouldn't have to endure this. You wouldn't be scrambling about, crying and wailing, searching for anything that might do as a weapon and barricading the door with a few bits of furniture, had you thought of something to say that night, when Sebastián Martínez's dogs began to howl as if they'd seen the devil and you found him there, standing ever so still, his leather gaiters in shreds and his white shirt seeped in blood. You'd have done better to come up with some pretence, anything that got him to answer goodnight and sent him back to where he'd come from, but curse your luck, it didn't happen that way. Too damned bad. Without trading words you bid him step inside, pulled up a chair, he let himself fall heavy as lead, and then you spotted the other wound on his forehead, I'm tired, is all he muttered, and then he crashed onto the floor like a buckling horse. What got into you, Felicidad Mosquera? What ill-fated star beguiled you like that, what evil wind blew directly into your heart to blaze it up that way, to blind you? 'Cause you were rightly blinded. Those chills you felt, when you gazed at his features and acknowledged that he was beautiful. That you liked his dark moustache. The nervous hurry with which you set the pot to boil and prepared the herb plasters— it wasn't your usual haste. You've always been cool-headed. A watchful heart. Vigilant. You've never fallen head over heels for anybody. What happened to you, clue me in. What the hell came over you when instead of driving him away, once he felt better and began going on walks at night, collecting wood for you, offering to husk the corn, to fetch water— when instead of saying O.K., farewell, you claimed that it wasn't any bother, of course not, that he should stay a few more days. What the fuck happened. I can't make any sense of it. Felicidad Mosquera, I hardly

recognize you. I never thought one could change so quickly, switch from black to white like you did, just so: from one day to the next. Every time he set his blue eyes on yours, you were seized by a tremor, and you stuttered, child-like, when he asked for a pinch of salt and then grazed you with his fingers as you placed it in his hand, for in those moments everything inside you came undone, changed flows, you just lost it, so how's it fucking possible you didn't even catch on? To place salt in someone else's hand is an ominous thing. It brings bad luck. Ill fate. And what about that day, when instead of letting him get a breath of air on his own, you got all flustered when he offered let's take a turn and when you crossed the bridge he took hold of your waist —'cause it's wobbly, was his excuse—, but you very well felt how that warmth emanating from his touch started spilling in, scorching, aching, for it was a cry that voiced what dwelt inside you. A deep moan. They're coming, Felicidad Mosquera. They'll come screaming that they know all about it. Rousing up the house and kicking down doors, like they did to Prospero Montoya's wife, who they ditched in a wash basin with her belly gashed open and the baby still inside. They won't give you the chance to take flight. When they arrive suddenly like that, they're ready to end you. Ready to disappear you without a trace. They'll claim they know all about him to get you to fall for their ruse. But only you and the Lord were witness. The only witnesses to that encounter in the tall grass, on the river banks, between the layers of scent. Who else but you can swear to that ecstasy, his member that sought your insides as it traced your boundaries and turned you into a current, into furtive light, into sea, who else but you could know of the cadence of your feverish hips, of your hands searching for him, reaching for the thighs which pressed softly against your entrance to life. Who but you heard his groan? His tender exploration. His long and unremitting orgasm while you sunk into the stillness of luscious flesh, into a rapid throb that hastened the pulse of your muscles and in the end slackened, delivering a body-wide contraction, an inner howl which surfaced towards you like a flood. And who could be the judge of you, Felicidad Mosquera, when only the Lord and you can swear to its truth. No one will dare. Let them search your very innards, hack you to bits with their blades, pierce your senses, penetrate your very soul, seeing as they won't find a thing. Not a single strand. So drop the barricade. Cast away your fears. Don't curse no more 'cause he's far off and all that really matters is that he save himself so that he carry on fighting. You won't breathe a word. Not even if they set your shanty alight, shove in their pricks or bottles, do the same things they did to the others to break you down, stay firm goddammit, Felicidad Mosquera, don't scream or cry. Open the door yourself. Stand upright in the doorway. Hold their stare.

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## MAY AS WELL CALL IT QUILTS

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Say brother what's with the new price hikes on beef and 'em scrambled-eggs sky high 'cause you can hardly afford a pound of butter and eggs are soaring gas workers have been on strike since Monday the electric bills cost an arm and a leg as well as schooling for the boys this morning they were hounding me for an extra quarter to ride the bus 'cause nowadays it costs as much as a cab ten years ago even though I keep hearing those *gringos* in New York pay the price of gold for coffee and how that's our bonanza though in our stores all we ever get is the low-grade stuff... have you even had a sip of a decent home-grown roast recently? Dunno what's worse whether these jacked up prices or the idiot box yammering on so that your old lady fancies any goddam thing she gets advertised or those government hardhats or the students protesting or that Fab soap which hardly removes any stains I'd be hard-pressed to recall this much thievery and meanness on the streets why just yesterday they cleaned out three *cantinas* and a bank plus at the church of *San Roque* they even took off with the priest's cassocks and what of the kidnappings well it's small change compared to yesterday's report in *El Tiempo* on parliamentary impunity and today it's hot off the press that a senator cooked up a fine scheme to swindle those priests serves those idiots right and anyway who asked 'em to be such bootlickers... did you read about the bishop? he's in hot water I'll be damned those crooks are first-rate at stirring up trouble and what of the cocaine on board the *Frigate Insignia* just wait and see at election time they'll have us vote for whoever offers a chicken in every pot that's a real con but this time there's no fucking way I'll drop any ballot in the box it don't work like that 'cause I'm right well fed up that's what I said last Thursday I made it pretty damn clear before they set down the Brotherhood minutes... bonanza? Bogus... not for the straw-hatted bumpkin don't fall for that old trick they'll leave us chumps as always hoping for a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.

# “On the Road to Houmt Souk”

by Soledad Puértolas

translated by Francisca González Arias

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## INTRODUCTION

Soledad Puértolas is one of the most distinguished authors of today’s Spain. Her creative coming of age coincided with the democratic transition that was marked by artistic ferment and a proliferation of women writers. Since her first novel *El bandido doblemente armado* (Premio Sésamo, 1980) she has published twelve more novels and seven collections of short stories, as well as several volumes of essays. Soledad Puértolas received the Premio Planeta for *Queda la noche* (1989), the Anagrama Premio de Ensayo for *La vida oculta* (1993), and many more honors and distinctions, notably her election to the Real Academia Española (RAE) in 2010.

“On the Road to Houmt Souk” (from *Adiós a las novias*, Anagrama 2000) combines several themes, motifs and situations that recur throughout the author’s narratives. A chance encounter leads to an epiphany, an experience that both triggers reflection and empowers. Openness to the other—people and cultures—provokes fortuitous engagement that relieves the loneliness of modern, urban life. Travel both instigates and parallels the inner journey.

Like so many of Soledad Puértolas's protagonists, the unnamed narrator of "On the Road to Houmt Souk" is a traveler; a thoughtful, somewhat solitary and passive woman. An old boyfriend's invitation to spend the New Year's holiday on the Isle of Djerba thrusts her into the path of a mysterious young woman who embodies the island's beauty and magic. The desert light sparks inner clarity, the glimpse of change, and affirmation of the self. The narrator's second encounter with "the goddess of dusk" illustrates her fear of being sidetracked on her path to autonomy, a journey that culminates in a decision as radical as it is logical. "On the Road to Houmt Souk" can be read as an eco-feminist tale and as an example of female agency in contemporary Spanish fiction.

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Francisca González Arias completed her doctorate at Harvard University with a dissertation on the nineteenth century novelist and short story writer Emilia Pardo Bazán, and she has taught in various universities in the New England area. Her research interests are focused on women writers of the Spanish-speaking world. She has numerous translation projects underway of works by Soledad Puértolas and the Mexican author Cristina Rivera Garza. Her translation of Soledad Puértolas's second novel *Bordeaux* appeared in the European Women Writers Series of the University of Nebraska Press (1998), and her translations into Spanish of Emily Dickinson were published by the University of Valencia Press: Fascicles 7 & 8 (2016) and Fascicles 9 & 10 (2018).

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## ON THE ROAD TO HOUMT SOUK

Ernesto called me the fifteenth of December and told me that he couldn't take it anymore: people were harassing him, constantly asking him to do things, inviting him here and there. He wanted to get away, and had thought of the isle of Djerba in Tunisia, of a hotel lost among the dunes, where the only thing to do was walk, take a dip in the sea, swim in the fresh water pool, play tennis, and lie in the sun. He told me he had thought of me because I loved to swim, and also played tennis, though not very well, and finally, he said, I knew some French.

It wasn't a very passionate invitation, but I accepted. Our meetings, fewer and further apart, always left me with an uncomfortable sense of disappointment. Perhaps we should try to be friends, I said to myself, only friends. Maybe he too had come to the same conclusion.

There had been a time when I was in love with Ernesto. Before he became famous and rich as a result, I had listened with loving patience to his angry complaints about rampant bad taste, and of the difficulty of trying to succeed in a society so manipulated that its only measure of value is money. I tried to comfort and encourage him, and to tell him to hold out, for that was the only thing worth doing. Then, suddenly, he was famous, and his paintings drew impressive sums. I don't know if by then I was that much in love with him, but I still liked him. With me he had a habit of complaining; I wonder if he did the same with others. He deplored social climbing, envy, the loss of tranquility and time, the lack of respect.... People wouldn't leave him alone. His friends were the worst. They took advantage of him, and unfortunately he was incapable of saying no. But all that had to end. He wasn't a social institution. He was simply a man, a person who painted.

I liked him better when he talked about painting: of proportion, forms, harmony, symmetry, tones, chiaroscuro, transparency, light. I ended up understanding something about all that.

But, once I realized that he was in no way the man of my dreams, I lost interest in his complaints and artistic conversations. What friendship could there be between us, I wondered when I hung up the phone after telling Ernesto that, yes, I'd go with him to the isle of Djerba.

Going with him is a little like going alone, I told myself. He doesn't know many things about me, partly because he never asked many questions: he always preferred to complain about something or other. And partly because I'm becoming a silent, perhaps overly solitary person. I've never been to Tunisia, I thought. One has to be open, see the world. I shouldn't close myself off so much. I'd have preferred to go to Sousse or Hammamet, which seemed to be more lively, worldly places, but Ernesto was looking for peace and a little bit of desert, and the truth is I had also been fascinated by the call of the desert at one time. The vibrating line of the horizon, mirages, oases, the supple, highly evocative palm trees, the blazing sun, and the cold nights... Yes, I had dreamed of all that, inspired surely by oriental tales. On the isle of Djerba I could swim in the fresh water pool, dive into the sea, walk by the waves, be in the desert.

We arranged to meet at the Barcelona airport because Ernesto was coming directly from Brussels where he'd been to an exhibition opening, and the flight he had chosen for the day after Christmas left from Barcelona. The airport was full of people, luggage, and carts loaded with suitcases. It was hot, because the day wasn't very wintry, and the heat was on too high, but as in all airports, once in a while there were drafts, and a little fearful, I said to myself that it was the ideal situation in which to catch a bad cold, because when I travel my defenses are down and I catch all kinds of illnesses. I also get them when I don't travel. In my family I have a reputation for being very delicate, and my relatives still listen to my grumbling, but the rest of the world doesn't pay me much attention, and Ernesto fell into that category. He'd never paid much attention to me, not even when I was completely healthy. In reality he had never known me to be ill, didn't know anything about my weak spots.

I saw Ernesto in the cafeteria. He was holding a book, one of those treatises on architecture he likes so much. For a while we talked about how things had gone in Brussels and of the commitments he had just taken on, and that he wanted to forget about right away. Our flight was delayed, and when Ernesto submerged himself once again in his reading, I went to the bookstore and bought a novel by a young American author, because, although it's hard to believe, it hadn't occurred to me to put a book in my bag, and it seemed like a good idea to select a work by an American author because Americans know a lot about airports and maybe they also write about them. In fact, the first paragraph described the protagonist's arrival at the Los Angeles airport. I read it several times because it was very good. But as soon as the protagonist got home, he dived into a whirlpool of comings and goings, parties, trivial conversations, cocaine at one's discretion—or rather, without any discretion—and beds. He'd get into any bed that was occupied, and didn't seem to care by whom. He said he was very bored. I got to page twenty-seven and when we left the cafeteria I put the book on a chair, in case it could be of use to someone else.

It was night by the time we were able to join the check-in line. There are a lot of people who think that when you're queuing, you're obligated to sneak to the head of the line. There are true masters in the art of managing to move their luggage ahead of everyone else's. They push you surreptitiously with their suitcase. They tend to be solitary people, and it's obvious they're in no hurry to get anywhere, but they've gotten it into their heads to inconvenience their fellow human beings. Perhaps life has never given them anything at the appointed time, and so they push to see if finally they reach their goal before anyone else. Many people got in front of us while Ernesto, seated on his suitcase, which seemed to be very solid, continued reading, and I began to feel terribly tired. Just behind us, two children, a boy and a girl, about ten and twelve years old, dragged sports bags bulging with tennis rackets. Looking at them it dawned on me that I'd forgotten to bring my racket. Ernesto hadn't brought his either. Perhaps you could rent them at the hotel.

The tennis children had a father with a resigned look who dragged his own sports bag with a racket handle sticking out. I didn't see the mother anywhere. They were Catalan. The children called their father Enric. You didn't need to be very clever to understand that he was a divorced parent and had picked up his children that very afternoon at his ex-wife's house so they could spend part of their Christmas vacation with him. And it had occurred to him to take them to Tunisia, to one of those hotels with all kinds of equipment and opportunities for entertainment—pool, tennis courts, horse-back riding . . .—that the travel agency brochures show you. Exactly the same idea that Ernesto had had, and I agreed to. I felt a little sorry for that man, because he was wrapped in an air of infinite patience. He knew what that vacation meant, and was ready for anything. Besides, I found him rather attractive and gave him a look of encouragement. I feel a deep affinity for divorced men who make an effort to entertain their children. There was a time when there were a lot of divorced men, but now there are fewer and fewer. I smiled at him as we stood in line, and later, as many times as I could throughout the trip: on the bus, in the plane, and at the Tunisia airport. And I even had a chance to smile at him in the small plane that took us from Tunisia to the island of Djerba, because they were going there too.

After that long, slow line, and the usual amount of time at the gate, we boarded the plane for Tunisia, tightly packed and weary, without knowing if we were hungry, or sleepy, or hopelessly tired. I ate what I could of whatever it was they gave us, closed my eyes, and slept a little. It was pitch-dark when we arrived in Tunisia. They welcomed us with shouts on the other side of the glass door. "Passengers traveling to Tunis!" "To Djerba!" There were very few of us headed for Djerba, and I wished there were even fewer. It was better to stay in Tunis no matter what. We filled out forms, made new lines, if you could call lines those shapeless groups of people who tried to get near the

counter, and, completely convinced that our luggage was going to stay in Tunis forever, we again boarded a plane, this time a small one.

It must have been about two in the morning when we got off the plane in the Djerba airport. There was no one there. It was dark and silent, and the group that got off the plane wasn't up to making a lot of noise. Without much hope, we waited for our luggage. Miraculously, it appeared with the green sticker of the "Tour" in full view. I can't help feeling astonished, with a stab of true joy, whenever I recognize my suitcase on the conveyor belt of an airport. I like suitcases when they're open on my bed and I begin to put things in them. If I lose my suitcase, perhaps I lose that moment as well. The things I have at that moment, my life at that moment.

The commotion began when we went outside. We had an inkling when we looked through the window: the wind, the clumps of fallen leaves blowing level with the ground, the palm fronds shaking, on the verge of disappearing, of being pulled from the tree trunks. It wasn't cold, but the wind, loaded with sand, thrashed our bodies. You could hardly take a step forward. We walked, feeling our way between the wind and the darkness, shouting the name of our hotel, in search of a bus that would, with all certainty, take us there. A man covered from head to toe came toward Ernesto and me and pointed to a bus, the most ramshackle one. We took our bags and found seats. People started getting in with the same uncertainty as we. Finally, another swaddled man looked at us, and without saying anything he got on the bus and turned on the ignition.

The ride seemed interminable, although, given the condition of the vehicle, which lurched violently from side to side, it seemed as if we were going very fast. Under the headlights we saw how the wind dragged the sand and small dry bushes that had been uprooted from the ground. Once in a while, small, inhabited towns would emerge with tenuously illuminated white houses on the sides of the road. There were arrows indicating the names of the hotels. But everything disappeared rapidly; our silent driver had been infected by the wind's speed. We dashed through sandy roads, everyone silent, exhausted. Nobody asked any questions or pronounced the name of their hotel. It was of no use any more.

About an hour had gone by like that as we gazed at the island night, thinking perhaps we'd see the sunrise from that rickety bus, and, in the end, we couldn't complain since we were lost in the middle of the desert, and that was the reason why we had come, when finally the bus began to follow a road to a hotel. Then the stops at several hotels began. We let off groups of two, three and four people at the entrances to brightly lit hotels. The travelers would get off the bus and struggle against the wind and their suitcases, surrounded by men who raised their arms and pointed towards the glass doors as if they were warning the shaken voyagers to get into the hotel as soon as possible lest some kind of calamity occur.

We were the only ones left on the bus and Ernesto confronted the driver and pronounced the name of our hotel several times as loudly as he could. The man nodded, not angry or smiling, but somewhere between indignant and ironic, accustomed to episodes like that, seemingly in control of the situation and the bus's progress.

Finally we arrived at our hotel, the most remote and secluded of all. Nobody came out to welcome us at that hour of the night as the branches of the palm trees curved violently in terrible jerks.

While I find second-class hotels depressing, luxury hotels intimidate me. I have no idea how to behave on the plush carpets and under the untiring watchfulness of a whole troupe of doormen, waiters and messengers. Although it wasn't as bright as some of the hotels we had left behind, after the long journey breathing in the desert dust, that hotel seemed very luxurious to me. And it seemed cold. Everything –the floor and walls-- was made of white marble. The crystal drops that hung from the ceiling accentuated the impression of coldness; in due time they probably lit up.

We were led through a wide hallway and opened the door of our room. It was then I found out that Ernesto and I were going to share a room, but at that moment it was all the same to me. The room was spacious and had everything it should; it didn't look out on the sea, but rather on the desert and the shaking palm trees surrounding the hotel. Ernesto immediately said he didn't like it, but our bellboy responded that nothing could be done that night; we should speak with the hotel manager in the morning. I knew who was going to speak to the manager.

I looked in the dark for my nightgown and toiletry case, undressed, and got into bed; fortunately, there were two beds. I fell asleep, lulled by the sound of the wind and the water that was filling the tub, because that's what Ernesto did as soon as he arrived, he took a bath.

The light woke me. We hadn't lowered the blinds. In the bed next to mine Ernesto slept profoundly. He was rather handsome when he slept. I looked at the clock: it was ten A.M. I showered and got ready to speak with the manager and insist on our rights as agreed to at the travel agency. I walked on the plush carpets and along the immaculate marble, passing leather armchairs and lacquered tables here and there, and large windows that did indeed look out on the sea. The blue and radiant sea we had come to contemplate.

There, in the middle of the lobby, in the midst of the coming and going of luggage and tourists clad in pastel-colored running suits, mostly pink and blue with the occasional yellow, I defended our right, agreed to at the agency, and as Ernesto had told me before I fell asleep, to a room with a view of the sea. I fought so hard that I got it, despite the stubbornness of the manager who had decided to lodge a pair of German newlyweds in our sought-after accommodation. I told

him that my husband was a very famous painter, and the Spanish consul in Tunis himself had recommended this hotel to him. If only I were capable of fighting for other things in life with the same passion that I fought for that room. But I think it was annoying enough to have to share a room with Ernesto, so the idea of not having a view of the sea was the last straw. At that moment, the room with a view was a matter of life or death. And I got it.

They transferred our luggage while we had breakfast in the almost empty dining room, blinded by the outside light, the white sand, and the bright blue line of the sea.

The wind continued and it wasn't hot at all. Tourists sunned themselves on lounge chairs around the swimming pool or, dressed warmly, strolled along the shore; some were on horseback or rode a camel. There was a stream of people that came and went and after learning that the tennis courts were booked for the entire week and that they didn't rent tennis rackets, Ernesto and I joined them. We walked a lot, in the direction of, and against, the wind, with the sun in our faces and at our backs. After lunch, we took a nap in the new room, from whose terrace you could observe the sea at the end of a series of soft yellow dunes. An island native was sitting among the dunes, waiting for his horse or his friend to return, or not waiting for anything; but there he was, looking around him with faint curiosity. He also looked at us, the people on the terraces.

The next day we rented a car. It was too cold and we couldn't spend the whole day strolling, and you had to be heroic to swim in the sea or in the pool, of fresh but ice-cold, water. I didn't see anybody swimming. We visited the fort that, as they told us, had been occupied by the Spanish; we ate in the square at Houmt Souk, bought sponges in Adjin, drove around the island, and crossed the isthmus that connects it to the mainland, stopping in each town until we got to Gabes in search of the oasis. It took us a long time. We drove round and round until we found it at sunset, at the bottom of a giant gorge. The immense expanse of palm trees had been there for hundreds of years and would be there for many more. The sight was so thrilling because it evoked the memory of something lost, the beginning of the world or of faith, your very dreams or the dreams of humanity. We couldn't speak. We had tea near the beach while Tunisian music blared from a speaker above our heads.

Night was falling when we returned to Djerba inside a small ferry which we boarded after an hour wait, surrounded by tourists and natives who left their cars, vans, and motorcycles to climb the rose-colored hills that bordered the road to verify that the ferry was indeed coming and going, and that at some point it would come for us.

Ernesto felt cold, but he was in a great mood, marveling at the houses crowned by domes that emerged in the middle of the countryside. We had been seeing houses like those the entire day. We stopped a hundred times to see them more closely and take pictures. I didn't regret being with

him, in the ferry, in the car, on the way to the hotel, both lost on the island of Djerba, avidly searching for directions at every road crossing.

The next day, Ernesto wanted to stay in the hotel. I gathered my courage and went to Houmt Souk. I left the car at the entrance to town and strolled through the streets, refusing offers of kilims and pottery. But I bought baskets and several trays of different colors. They were unbreakable and weren't very heavy, and I like to return home with gifts. I left the baskets in the car and went to have couscous and salad at a sidewalk café, surrounded by German and American tourists. Protected by them. To a certain extent, I wasn't as much of a tourist as they. The Spanish fortress was nearby, and the Spanish coast, not too far away. It was the hottest day so far and I took off my scarf and jacket. The tourists, with their bare legs and arms, looked at the sun. While we ate, natives with *chilabas* over their jeans and worn tennis shoes crossed the square slowly.

I began the trip back. The sun was setting and the desert had ocher tones. The road was very flat, the kind of road to take slowly. For a long stretch there wasn't anything. Only houses topped by domes in the distance. Then, the hotels began. That is, the hotel entrances, because you couldn't see the hotels, half hidden among the dunes. A little before reaching the hotel area, a figure emerged from the right side of the road. It wasn't anything too surprising. Along the length and breadth of Djerba on the desert terrain, once in a while, there's a person. You don't know where they're coming from, or where they're going. There are no houses around, no trees, or shadows, but the person is there. You see him, he looks at you, and you leave. He stays.

That person on the right of the road was a woman and she signaled for me to stop. I didn't have time to think. I stopped and she ran towards me. She was very young, probably not yet twenty. She began to explain things that, naturally, I didn't understand. She moved her hands a great deal and smiled broadly. By her gestures, I understood that she wanted to get in the car and would tell me when to let her off. I opened the door and she sat next to me. Suddenly the young woman began to laugh. She couldn't stop. Although it seemed strange to me, it wasn't a bad thing to see her laugh. It would have been worse if she had begun to cry. And she seemed to be having such a good time that, even though she may have been laughing at me, I couldn't feel offended or uneasy. She'd wipe her tears with the back of her hand, look at me, and surrender again to her loud laughter. Finally, she made a gesture with her hands, as if to say she was sorry, and pointed to a patch on the road, the next turn-off. I stopped the car and she nodded. The girl had stopped laughing. Suddenly solemn, she took from the folds of her skirt a string of beads that she left in my hands, and before I could react, she got out of the car.

I didn't go to Houmt Souk the next day or rent a bicycle because Ernesto didn't feel well, and I felt guilty leaving him alone in the hotel. He had come down with a terrible cold and had a bad headache. He secluded himself in the room, drinking mineral water and taking aspirins, surrounded by notebooks and with the television's remote control in his hands. It was the last day of the year and the hotel was filled with a festive air. The employees came and went putting up a canopy of wreaths and ribbons. In the middle of the lobby, on a platform, they had placed a lectern holding up sheets to sign if you wanted to attend that night's party. There was the party in the hotel's large dining room, and there was another, in an upscale restaurant on the mezzanine. It was very windy again. No one was by the pool. I took a walk along the beach and sat down a while, half protected by a dune. The light was radiant and the sun burned, but you couldn't stay outside long because you got full of sand and couldn't breathe. Almost everyone was inside the hotel. The tourists were dressed in summer clothes and observed the sunny day through the large windows. I went from the cafeteria to the bar, and had lunch in the dining room, surrounded by hungry Germans. They left the dining room with their hands full of tangerines. Very fragrant tangerines with stalks and leaves. I brought Ernesto some.

"It was a mistake to come here," he said. "This hotel is very isolated and with this unpleasant weather there's nothing to do. We should have gone to Sfax. That was my idea at the beginning."

"Just a few more days," I said while I peeled one of the tangerines.

"But you shouldn't have to count the days when you're on vacation."

"I'm having a good time."

He looked at me with distrust.

"You've gotten a tan," he observed. "But we've had bad luck with the weather. It's not normal for it to be so cold and windy at this latitude."

"It must be some kind of arctic wind."

"That's what they said. We're in the middle of a cold snap."

To console him I spoke about the festivities that were being prepared for that night.

"I have no intention of leaving the room."

I understood then that the hotel's atmosphere was exercising a powerful attraction on me and I was determined to spend the night going from party to party.

By mid-afternoon, people seemed rather animated. The women had already put on their gowns, and the men their jackets and bowties. The aroma of perfume wafted along the corridors. I got dressed in front of Ernesto's cold gaze, and went to the bar to have a cocktail. I was already somewhat friendly with the bartender. He'd serve me a whisky sour every time he saw me. I had only gone two days, but right away he'd say to me: "Your usual, right?" The whisky sour had been a

whim, but it was just right at mid-afternoon when, behind me, the people, all spruced up and scented, began to sound like they were at a party, and the sun shone outside without managing to warm the gusts of wind that hampered the tourists' movement.

But it was dark inside the bar. Dark glass and artificial light, because that's the essence of bars. Perpetual nightfall. I felt like talking with someone, whomever, although I resisted the thought of engaging in conversation with the Germans who were making a racket in a corner of the bar. It was getting full. The bartender brought me another whiskey sour. He smiled gaily as if everything he had seen of life and everything he was yet to see pleased him deeply. I was another tourist; he didn't even know if I was American, English or Spanish. Although he finally found out. When he placed the drink on the counter, he asked me:

"France, Paris?"

I shook my head.

"America?"

"Spain," I cut him short, "Madrid."

He was surprised, just like all the world's people are surprised when they encounter a Spaniard. In this, Tunisians were just like any other foreigner, if that smiling man was Tunisian, because I didn't ask him.

What really aroused my curiosity were the groups of Arabs, Tunisians probably, who had started to fill the bar. Very elegant, rather more attractive and silent than the Germans. White-haired older men in formal attire. Young men with their hair slicked back. Women with long curly hair, tight dresses and very high heels like the kind you don't see anywhere anymore. Beautiful young women who reminded me of the incident the day before, when I returned from Houmt Souk at dusk with the trunk of the car full of baskets and my arm resting on the car's open window, breathing in the afternoon air, and full of pleasant emotions. The sun gilded the sand and cast a shine on the water that had trickled beyond the dunes, soaking the roots of purple plants. In a way, the girl's laughter wasn't strange, if she felt as happy as I. Perhaps these elegant and modern young women with a fixed and provocative gaze, who crossed their legs sheathed in black stockings with dignity and ease, wore Arabic dress on other occasions. Maybe the girl on the road was dressed that night, New Year's Eve, in a black velvet gown, long earrings and a pearl necklace.

They could be island residents coming to dine at our hotel to celebrate the New Year. Wealthy and Europeanized residents of the island of Djerba. I looked at them with curiosity. They spoke French, except when they murmured. They'd draw their heads close together and it was certain they didn't speak French then. The unmistakable, guttural sound of Arabic resonated towards me.

We looked at each other, they and I. The Germans were drunk enough so as not to look at anybody. Blind with laughter, they constantly ordered more drinks from the bartender, my bartender of the whisky sours; never overwhelmed by the orders, he was always calm and smiling.

Finally, they left. It was almost dinnertime. I had signed up for the dinner, although what I really wanted was to dine with the Arabs. I sensed that they would eat in the other dining room, darker, more luxurious, more intimate, and, surely, devoid of Germans.

The bar emptied. Groups, laughing or composed, invaded the corridors on the way to the dining rooms. Among them, but not a part of any, I went downstairs and stepped on the plush carpets. The Arabs turned toward the dining room on the mezzanine. I continued toward the basement. The grand dining room had been decorated profusely, almost all the tables were occupied, and euphoria reigned. The women's dresses shone and many of the guests had paper streamers around their bodies. I stepped back, as if I had suddenly forgotten something very important, and rushed upstairs. In the mezzanine, I looked into the other restaurant. In sharp contrast with the hotel's dining room, full of lights and vibrating with agitation, this restaurant was lit by candlelight and its occupants were discreet and courteous. There were hats and streamers on the tables, but nobody had made use of them yet. Then I saw a familiar face, a man who smiled at me. I recognized him at the moment he held out his hand. It was Enric, the single father who had traveled with us.

“What a coincidence!” he exclaimed. “Are you going to have dinner here?”

I told him that this was my hotel and I didn't know where I was going to dine because I hadn't made a reservation. Ernesto was ill, I explained to him, and the thought of going back to my room depressed me, so I had been wandering around the hotel since early that afternoon.

“Then you must dine with us,” he said, taking my arm.

He took me to his table and introduced me to his friends; he had a chair brought for me, placed it at his right, and, finally, I was settled among one of those groups of Arabs that had so drawn my attention in the bar. They were Enric's friends and had invited him to go to that restaurant because it was the best one on the island. We were going to enjoy a sophisticated and traditional meal. Wasn't it incredible to have run into each other? And the children? At his hotel, at a special dinner organized for children. He wasn't worried. They were very responsible, used to being alone since they were little because his wife and he had separated soon after Mereia's birth and the children had always gone from one place to another. Today they were allowed to go to bed a little later.

What a marvelous night awaited us, without commitments or obligations, among dishes of exotic food and a series, not of Arabic, but European, or international, drinks, open smiles, shining faces, hands that came and went over plates. Suddenly, we all became animated. It was as if someone had pressed a button. There was background music, Tunisian music that reminded me of the tea

Ernesto and I had had in the little snack bar at the beach in Gabes after having finally found the oasis. I spoke of that oasis to Enric, of everything we had seen and what had been most forcefully engraved in my mind: the road to Houmt Souk, the purple expanse, furrowed by hundreds of canals and crossed by paths leading towards the beach, that narrow end of the island where we had gone the first morning of our stay, and where there was a house and a couple of palm trees that from the road looked like a small island where one could live outside the world, the ocher colored houses on the right with their evocative domes and odd composition. And I told him about the episode of the young woman I had picked up on my return, her fit of laughter, and her gift.

At that moment, a young Arab man who was sitting on my right turned toward me, interested, and asked me to repeat the anecdote in French, because he had understood something and wished to understand it all. I repeated it, more or less. The young man, with an enigmatic smile on his lips and a hint of serenity at the bottom of his dark, shining eyes, said to me:

“I think I know who that young woman is. There is a legend on the island, of the girl who wanders lost along the roads, fleeing her home. She has a crystalline, contagious laugh and many people have disappeared in pursuit of her. She is the goddess of dusk. They say her gaze intoxicates.”

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“It was a girl who wanted me to take her to a crossing in the road; she was going to a hotel, perhaps she was an employee,” I replied, thinking he was teasing me.

“You can think what you want,” he said, placing one of his hands on my arm and piercing me once again with his extraordinarily intense gaze. “I can’t tell you either whether I believe it or not. But legends have their reason, and, in the end, some truth. And if they’re true, you’ve had a privileged encounter. Don’t think that the goddess appears to just anyone. A moment ago I heard you speaking about the road to Houmt Souk and I realize you’ve been captured by the island’s spell. That’s why the young woman appeared to you. It’s part of the magic.”

I had goose bumps. Enric put his arm around my shoulders. Each had his own point of view. Was I the bone of contention or was something much more important being posed?

“Forget it,” said Enric, laughing. “If it was something supernatural, it’s over.”

Later, he whispered in my ear: “Without a doubt that girl was a hotel employee somewhere. You mustn’t fall into these people’s traps.” And he winked at me.

But I couldn’t get it out of my mind, because there was something undoubtedly true in what my young dining companion had said: I had been caught up by the island’s magic. It seemed to me as if I’d spent a long time on the island, had known it for centuries, and that more than ever it was on my return from Houmt Souk after the meal in the sun, when a great joy had pervaded me, a sense of

plenitude, of knowing myself capable of delighting in the light's every hue, the warmth, the sweet approach of evening.

What was life like for Tunisian women? Enric didn't know much either. I suspected it was hard. His friends had been educated in France, and had an open mind, but in certain things they were impenetrable. He had never visited them at home. The women who were sitting at the table besides myself were a very elegant and silent lady, who never once opened her mouth and whose age was impossible to calculate, but who could have been around fifty; and two very beautiful and lively young women who would let out short cries, only to fall silent and look worried, and once again after a little while, laugh loudly. Very beautiful, very made-up. And the odd thing was that neither of the two was the wife of any of the men with us. Enric didn't know who those women were. The older one was the mother of one of the young men, he thought. But the young women were somebody's sisters, or sisters-in-law. Marriageable young women, in any case. What future awaited them? Their dark eyes, outlined in black, and their abundant hair with copper highlights, showed vitality, and, at the same time, some fear. There they were, spending New Year's Eve in an elegant restaurant, dressed like self-assured Parisian girls, but they were in Djerba, not far from their homes.

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Meanwhile, Enric was proposing we see each other the next day, the first of January, in Houmt Souk. We could have lunch together and stroll through the medina. Having a date in Houmt Souk sounded very good. He asked me:

"I don't want to be indiscreet, but do you have any obligation to Ernesto? I mean . . ."

"Nothing," I said looking at my plate and emphasizing the denial with a determined movement of my head from side to side. A little later, we toasted the New Year.

The dinner was over. The music became louder. A dancer moved among the tables, violently shaking her hips and the long dark hair that reached her waist. We had coffee and a lot of drinks, while more dancers came and went from the restaurant, and finally, feeling very happy and comfortable with each other, we said good-bye. Enric's Arab friends had brought him and he had to leave with them. Djerba wasn't a city; Enric couldn't just walk back to his hotel. Djerba was an island and the hotels were rather far apart and were hidden among the dunes. It wouldn't have been easy to find a hotel in the middle of the night.

I said good-bye to the people in the group. Everyone was a little drunk, except the women, who hadn't had any drinks.

"See you tomorrow," whispered Enric.

"Be careful of the island's magic," said the Arab man, and he held my hand tightly within his.

I returned to my room, dodging the drunks. Ernesto was sleeping. I undressed without turning on the light or making noise.

“What time is it?” he asked from his sleep.

“Two o’clock,” I said. “Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year,” he grunted.

It was three. There was no need to lie, but I like to lie when people ask me questions like that. What the devil did he care what time it was?

On the first day of January, Ernesto woke up with an intense feeling of urgency. He wanted to recuperate the time he had lost. He was going to get the car and drive through the island taking pictures. Did I want to go with him?

I had a hangover and could hardly sit up, but above all, I had a date in Houmt Souk.

“Very well,” he said, irritated when I said no, “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Fine,” I said turning over within the sheets.

It’s fantastic, I said to myself, how he’s disappearing from my life without any drama. There isn’t even any friendship left.

After an hour I got up. I showered, dressed, and rented a bicycle at the hotel entrance. The bicycle was too heavy, but it was the best I could find and I rushed out on the path towards the road to Houmt Souk.

Free, at any rate. Alone, once again, on the island of Djerba, the first of January, 1986. Once in a while you have to say it: the first of January, 1986. Dates. Facts. I tied a scarf around my head, put on my sunglasses and began to pedal. Again, happiness. The brilliance of the sun on a winter morning, blinding your eyes, extinguishing colors. Houmt Souk was far away, and I had to make a tremendous effort to pedal. The wind, the annoying wind of that Christmastime, was against me. It was a long trip; my whole body struggled so that the bicycle didn’t stop on the side of the road. The few cars that passed honked their horns. Their occupants looked at me with curiosity. What did they know about my fight against the wind?

When I finally got off the bike in the streets of Houmt Souk I was covered in sweat and my legs trembled, but since I was alone I couldn’t let myself faint. I left the bicycle leaning against the curb and looked for the café where I was going to meet Enric. He was leaning against the wall, near the door. You could make him out immediately, surrounded by noisy Arab men of all ages.

“I think I’m going to faint,” I told him.

He took my arm and made me sit down inside the café. He brought me very hot, very sweet coffee and I began to recover my vision, but my legs still trembled a little.

“You’ve pushed yourself a lot, that’s all. It’ll go away in a moment.”

We had more coffee and went out into the street. My weakness was transformed into euphoria. A doctor told me once that happens fairly often. I felt the warmth of Enric's body, his arm against my arm, the people who brushed against, and pushed us, the sun on our heads, and the smell of strong and indeterminate spices that came suddenly from an alleyway.

We ate at a sidewalk restaurant, this time surrounded by more natives than tourists. Everything tasted good to me: the salad, the couscous, and the wine. Enric spoke, offered his opinions about the world's progress, lost pleasures, special moments. I agreed with him. He was pale in the resplendent light of the sun, and his delicate hands lit consecutive cigarettes. You go with one man, and return with another.

We walked through Houmt Souk, got lost in the medina's streets, visited the mosque, sat in another café and concluded that the trip had been worthwhile. At dusk we looked for my bicycle in a tangle of bikes, and there it was, still leaning against the curb. Enric wanted to drive me to the hotel, but I had recuperated my strength and the trip didn't scare me. The wind would be at my back, and I needed that ride and that time for myself. You have to go back home slowly.

It was slow, indeed, but easy. The bicycle glided gently along the road, and I didn't have to make an effort. My head was full of fantasies, but I could appreciate the sweetness of the evening, its colors, and its immensity.

At the same curve where I had seen her the first day, I saw her again, the young Arab woman of the irrepressible laugh. I had no choice but to stop, among other things because she put out her arms towards the bike's handlebar to stop it. And there, clutching the rusty handlebar, she continued to speak as if she had never interrupted her conversation with me. She raised her arm and pointed toward the other side of the road, toward the sand covered with purple underbrush, furrowed by paths that reached the line of the sea, and the dunes. In reality, she was pushing me with her radiant smile and her incessant chant. I saw a string of beads around her neck like the one she had given me, and she nodded, asking a question with a movement of her arms. I told her I had put her gift in a safe place. She seemed to understand me. But she kept pulling my bike with all her strength. We were already at the other side of the road. I told her that whatever it was she wanted to show me, I was grateful, but couldn't accompany her; I was in a hurry, they were waiting for me at the hotel. "Hotel! Hotel!" I shouted and repeated, as if it were a magic word. She let go of the bicycle and I pedaled with all my strength until I left her behind. This time, the wind helped me. I arrived at the hotel in a quarter of an hour, without looking back or stopping for an instant.

Ernesto hadn't returned from his trip yet. I showered, dressed, and went to the bar to have my whisky sour. I wasn't thinking about Enric any longer, but of the episode with the young woman, my second encounter with the goddess of dusk. Men and women had mysteriously disappeared on

the island. All islands have their legends, all peoples. But it's easier to disappear by the sea. Perhaps the only thing the goddess of dusk wanted was to be my guide, to show me a place you couldn't see from the road, on the other side of the dunes, a perfect place, paradise. I had preferred to observe nightfall from the counter of the bar, thinking of all the island's mysteries.

Ernesto arrived at the hotel when I was on my second whiskey sour. He had visited the synagogue of El-May at the end of a long trip around the mainland. He said everything was impressive, but he was in a bad mood. I felt that he was full of hate towards me.

We spent those two days hardly moving from the hotel. Ernesto returned the rental car. The wind died down a little and from nine in the morning on, the beach was full of people who came and went hurriedly; by noontime no lounge chair in the pool area was free, and on the way to the bar, you tripped over bottles of suntan lotion, books, towels, and empty glasses; the tennis courts were always full; appetites didn't flag and everyone left the dining room carrying a couple of fragrant tangerines. And one very early morning we went in a rickety bus to the airport, which was much nearer than the long ride of our arrival would have led us to believe.

I saw Enric in the darkness among the drowsy people who were getting ready to leave the island. He came over and greeted us. He spoke with Ernesto, and I with Enric's children. They had had a wonderful time. Enric slipped a card with his name and address, I suppose, into my hand, and I put it in my handbag where it was lost forever.

It was dawn when the plane rose above the island of Djerba. The orange-colored light dissolved little by little, and turned into a piercing white brightness among the clouds.

