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TRANSLATORS' CORNER

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Parallel 35 (three excerpts)
and "The Dead Woman"

by Carmen Laforet
translated by Roberta Johnson

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Introduction

Carmen Laforet (1921-2004) burst on the Spanish literary scene in 1945 at age twenty-four when her first novel, *Nada*, which had won the first Nadal Prize, was published. She married the journalist Manuel Cerezales in the following year and thereafter had five children. Family life slowed her novel writing, but, in 1952, she did go on to publish *La isla y los demonios* [The island and the devils] and *La niña* [The girl], a collection of short stories, one of which I include here. These books were followed by *La mujer nueva* [The new woman] in 1955, and *La insolación* [The sunstroke] in 1963. Her fame was so significantly established by 1965 that she was invited by the United States State Department to tour the country as a key person to present a view of the United States during the cold war era, an honor reserved for influential foreigners. After a month-long tour that took her up and down the east coast, to the south, the mid- and far west, upon returning to Spain she wrote *Paralelo 35* [Parallel 35] (1967) with her observations about American life and institutions. The author was shepherded around by guide-translators as she spoke no English. Her trip took her to a variety of locations, including private homes, museums, a Sara Lee baked goods factory, a farm, several college and university campuses, NASA installations, and historical places such as San Agustín in Florida, the first Spanish settlement in the US.

I have selected to translate three passages from ***Paralelo 35*** here: one about Carmen Laforet's visit to Harvard University because it is the site of the present publication, and two passages in which she observes racial tensions in the US, where we see that her novelist's keen eye discerned the most troubling problem in American life, even today. As she preferred to think of herself as a fiction writer, I have also included the translation of one of her best short stories, **"La muerta"** [The dead woman] from her collection *La niña y otros relatos* [The girl and other short stories] (1973, 2nd ed.).

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About the translator

Roberta Johnson is Professor Emerita at the University of Kansas, and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at UCLA. She has published some 100 articles on a variety of subjects related to twentieth- and twenty-first century Spanish literature and thought, authored numerous books in this field, such as *Carmen Laforet* (1981); *Gender and Nation in the Spanish Modernist Novel* (2003), and *Major Concepts in Spanish Feminist Theory* (2018), and co-edited volumes on Spanish feminisms. Professor Johnson has won numerous awards and grants recognizing the significance of her scholarly and other academic work, including a Fullbright lectureship in Spain; a year-long NEH Fellowship-in-Residence at Duke University; a Guggenheim Fellowship; the Order of Don Quijote from the Spanish honor society Sigma Delta Pi; and the Order of Isabel la Católica from His Majesty King Juan Carlos of Spain.

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PARALLEL 35

University Vignettes - Harvard

My first visit in Boston was to the student village of Cambridge, next to Harvard University campus.

Harvard is one of the richest, oldest, and most prestigious universities in the United States. Its buildings, grounds, and streets form a veritable city.

At Harvard I had lunch with our poet Jorge Guillén and other Spanish and Latin American writers and professors. I traversed the streets of the University and went into some buildings, both in the old nucleus and in the more modern area, where there are buildings by the best contemporary architects. The only building by Le Corbusier in the United States is found at Harvard.

I visited the great central library, and in its museum I found something absolutely unique in the world—the collection of glass plants and insects made by the Blaschka family. The collection, which was begun in the nineteenth century and completed in the twentieth, was donated to Harvard by Mrs. Elizabeth G. Ward and Professor Soodale, who discovered the Blaschkas, naturalists and artists unique in their genre, for America.

Cambridge is also the home of my enchanting friend Joan Alonso, widow of Amado Alonso, who drove me in her car to the lake Emerson sung about.

The lake was a solitary retreat for the writer, and it was quite solitary the morning I saw it; but Mrs. Alonso explained to me that at present it was a place for tourism and swimming. We were accompanied by Josefina Yangua, a Spanish woman who has taken up residence in Cambridge; she is a businesswoman, owner of two prosperous locales—a Spanish restaurant, El Iruña, and Café Pamplona. Before Josefina opened these places, the students had nowhere outside the university to get together and talk in the European style.

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Cambridge is a town with special characteristics where many Harvard students live, especially married students, professors, and intellectuals.

The Harvard students, who give an intense life to the town, are usually rich, and you can find anything you might desire in Cambridge stores from antiques, fashion, textbooks –all of them expensive, as are the restaurants. One sees young couples dressed in a bohemian style on which they have spent a great deal of money. It is kind of an imitation of European student bohemianism, but an imitation constructed on a solid economic base.

A Tourist in Washington

I remember many things about Washington. My nocturnal visit to the city with its grand, silent, illuminated streets; the enormous obelisk, the monument to Abraham Lincoln, with its great white colonnade. The Congress. The impression of that smiling policeman who told us everything we wanted to know, and who, upon learning I was from Spain, spoke to me in Spanish because he was also a university student. The river reflecting the lights, the solitude and the silence of the city at night. At a distance, General Lee's house, lit up above Arlington Cemetery.

I also recall the classic tourist sights. The visit to George Washington's estate, Mount Vernon. Splendid estate, splendid house where one can easily imagine the hubbub of the black slaves at parties and day labor; where one can sit among the tourists who visit the house on the back porch and contemplate a superb landscape—the immense fields, the grand river, the private wharf of the Washington family, the autumnal trees…

The house is preserved by a league of women from prominent southern families. They have recovered as many authentic objects as possible, and the house is now furnished as it was in Washington's time. The mania for extreme, realistic exactness is shocking as it has led them to place mannequins with approximately the same features as

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the people who lived in the house—women doing handwork, playing cards…—. All too much. Just as in the cloister of the Encarnación convent in Ávila, where under a staircase there is a wax statue representing the baby Jesus appearing to Saint Teresa. It turns out that the things that shocked me in America, also occasionally shocked me in Spain.

I also visited Kennedy's simple tomb —with its grave marker between two small stones for his two children and the perpetual flame above it within the immense garden with hills and meadows that is the military cemetery of Arlington. It does not reflect the drama of death, although there are thousands of small white stones with a name and a date. The Arlington cemetery, with General Lee's museum house on a hill, and people strolling through there on their Sunday walk.

I visited the Library of Congress, this impressive mind of the world with its sixteen large reading rooms, its perfect archives, where one can find all the books on every subject written in every imaginable language, all available to everyone who lives in Washington. I saw part of the interior of the immense, marvelous Library of Congress: kilometers and kilometers of rows of books, with librarians placed strategically to receive requests through tubes that are then sent by special freight elevators and mobile carts. Everything is so perfectly organized that it renders one mute with astonishment. It does not take more than forty-five minutes for a book shelved in the most remote corner of the Library of Congress, to reach its reader, despite having to cover several kilometers.

This library is also a cultural center where there the most renowned people in the world do theatre performances and give lectures.

Stradivarius violins that are played by the best violinists in the best concerts are kept in a crypt closed off with golden bars.

The Spanish section of the Library of Congress is under the direction of the Chilean Manuel Aguileras. The Library has authorized him to acquire everything published in our language. He explained this to me and showed me a section of tapes and records by Hispanic authors, and I also listened to poems recited extraordinarily by their author Nicolás Guillén, among them his anti-Yankee poems.

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The Hispanic section, like many other sections of this fabulous library, and like all, or almost all the cultural and artistic institutions of the United States, is endowed by different private foundations. The criteria are absolute liberty within the artistic category. There is never a prohibition of any literary acquisition because of its ideas. Absolutely everything is found there.

This library was my first contact with the achievement of interest and perfection that American culture has attained, and it had a very strong impact on me.

One morning I visited the Art Gallery, which has a collection of French Impressionists that I had not even seen in Paris. And this was nothing, only the beginning of what I would see in my travels to other cities. And it was a great deal.

The second day of my stay in Washington, the Spanish Department of the University of Maryland offered me a friendly, intimate meal with people who live not only the language of Spain, but also its cultural interests. This is also the case in the departments of French and German. North American universities seemed to me tremendously serious in their specializations.

Learn About our Problems

One of my American friends, who after a tour of Washington, was enchanted with my admiration for the city, stopped the car in front of a children's hospital. She made a serious gesture.

"I think there is no racial discrimination in hospitals today," she told me, "but when I came to Washington a few years ago, I got a terrible impression of this hospital. It was great in the section for white children, but when you went into the Black ward, it was a completely different world. Everything that was old and lacked paint in the first ward was taken to the second wing. This was a criminal practice, because our country is too rich to allow things like that to happen. Carmen, you have to be aware of our huge problems. You can't just have only a rose-colored view of our affairs."

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I did not have a rose-colored view of USA matters. The press and literature had informed me of all kinds of violence, injustice, lynchings, fires. It had not been long since the incidents of Los Angeles, which had the characteristics of a civil war. On the contrary, I was surprised by the peaceful streets, surprised to always find colored people in offices, laboratories, in the State Department, in a larger proportion than the nineteen million human beings of that race, among two hundred million inhabitants of this enormous country, than one would think.

"That's nothing. It's like the beginning of a road toward total justice. So long as people keep talking of race and considering that all individuals with mixed blood belong to the so-called colored race…"

My friend and her husband, a couple who look completely Nordic, with blond, blue-eyed children, were a symbol of what I like best about the American people: this total efficiency that does not pay attention to sacrifices when an American person is convinced of an idea.

Another person informed me that this couple, friends of theirs, had moved so that their children could attend a school where there were black children.

"I don't understand. What is going on in the schools?"

The North American school—grammar and high school—covers what we call the *bachillerato*. These are excellent institutions, with freedom in pedagogical methods, and like all things in the United States, maintained by private initiative over and above help from the state, giving an advantage, of course, to the most affluent neighborhoods. There are schools located in areas where there is not a single household with people of color. For this reason, they instituted a system (which encountered tremendous resistance) by which children from different neighborhoods changed schools by means of bussing.

"This was a desperate and crazy measure" some people explained to me. Children and their parents have the right to attend school close to their homes. Many parents have sacrificed themselves to move to a neighborhood, which has meant economic inconveniences and efforts, with the sole purpose of enabling their children to attend a school they think is better. They cannot be deprived of this liberty.

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The American people have the idea of freedom in their blood. They cannot be imposed upon. And within that liberty are the traditions of the communities, the privileges of some groups, the passions, the created interests… And this is not just the case with white people, but also with the blacks. There is a tenacious fight on the part of black intellectuals against mixing the races, against admiration for the white race, against concessions. Eighty percent of blacks are an indifferent mass in the racial struggle. Fifteen percent want equality with their white compatriots and are willing to obtain it by peaceful means or otherwise. Lastly, five percent who call themselves "the five percenters" are fanatics who want the extermination of the white race. They don't want dialogue or concessions.

I gathered all this information in Washington. The person who told me that said I wouldn't learn anything about the United States without talking with people. I did not have the luck or misfortune of seeing any incident in the streets that revealed the tension between whites and blacks. I did not witness any demonstration, any hateful behavior, or any kind of violence. There were black families in my elegant hotel that were as nicely dressed and as well served at breakfast in the dining room as the white clients. The hotel servers were predominantly white. I had the right to believe, given what my eyes saw, that the racial problem had been completely solved. And, none-the-less, we all know that that is not true.

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THE DEAD WOMAN

Mr. Paco was not sentimental. He was a good man who liked to have a few glasses of wine with friends after work, and who only got drunk on the major holidays when there was a reason for it. He was a happy man with an ugly, congenial face. A few white hairs peeped out from under his cap and, above his scarf, a round, red nose.

When he entered his house, this nose remained suspended for a moment, as if sniffing, while Mr. Paco, who had just taken off his scarf, opened his mouth with a touch of surprise. Then he reacted. He took off his old coat on which his daughters had stitched a strip of black mourning cloth on one of the sleeves, and hung it on the coat rack that had adorned the hallway for thirty years. Mr. Paco rubbed his hands together and then did something totally outside his customs. He sighed deeply.

He had felt his dead woman. He had felt her there, in the quiet hallway of the house, in the ray of sun that filtered in through the little window to the little red bricks that lined the hallway. He had felt the presence of his wife, as though she were alive. As if she were waiting for him in the warm, recently limed kitchen, just as in the early days of their marriage… Then, things changed. Mr. Paco had been very unfortunate, and no one could reproach him a few little glasses of wine and a few little amorous adventures, which had cost him, it is true, a good sum of money… Nobody could reproach him with a constantly sick wife and two unruly and foul-mouthed, demonic daughters. No one had ever reproached him. Not even poor María, his dead wife, not even his own conscience. When his daughters' tongues occasionally loosened more than they should have, María herself had intervened from her bed or her easy chair to shut them up, gently but firmly. In the solitude of the bedroom, when he had been out of sorts, restless, tossing and turning in bed, María herself took pity on him.

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"Poor Paco!"

She could certainly pity him. She had always been very happy… She had always had food and medicines. Paco always worked hard, like a pack mule. Sometimes, it must be said, he had fantasized about his wife's death. And now he regretted it. But… she had been declared terminally ill so many times! … He was ashamed to contemplate it, but he couldn't help thinking about plans, for example, with a shapely widow who lived in the neighborhood and who left him breathless when she laughed at his flattering comments… María was paralyzed at the time… "It's progressive—the doctors had said—, the day will come when the paralysis reaches the heart, and then… you have to be prepared."

Mr. Paco was prepared. He already was when she had hydropsy, when she had the breast tumor, when… María's life in the last 20 years had gone from one bad disease to another worse one… And she was perfectly happy. As long as she had her medicines! Even without them because sometimes she gave the money for the medicines to the married daughter, often to buy things for the children… But what was certain was that suffering, what the doctors said she was suffering… no, María didn't notice those pains. She never complained. And when one suffers, one complains. Everyone knows that… Between one illness and another, she clumsily helped her daughters put the unkempt house in order. There were continuous shouts and arguments between the sisters who despised each other… This did mortify the poor woman. Those arguments that were a scandal in the neighborhood and never, not even on her death bed, could she enjoy peace.

During the three years of his wife's paralysis, Mr. Paco had had those secret projects about the widowed neighbor. He thought about throwing the daughters out of the house however he could and keep the flat for himself… After all,… And then to live… Destiny had to offer him some compensation.

Every day he spied on María's pale, smiling face. She would be slumped down in her easy chair, in a corner of the kitchen with the youngest grandchild on her paralytic knees, or sewing with her still agile hands, not worrying about what put Mr. Paco in such a foul mood: to see the kitchen so filthy, the walls black from not having been washed in years and the air full of smoke and the odor of rancid oil.

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María would raise her soft eyes up to him, that pale mouth where a mysterious and irritating smile always floated, and Mr. Paco would advert his eyes. He could see that she pitied him, as if she guessed his thoughts, and he looked away. She could pity him all she wanted, but the fact was that she was never going to die, although given the life she was leading, he would say to his friends when the wine loosened his tongue, as for the life she was living, she may as well be resting in peace…

One day Mr. Paco felt all his projects come tumbling down. He got home from work and, when he opened the door to the kitchen, he found his wife standing up washing the dishes as though she had no paralysis. The smile that greeted him was not at all shy.

"Guess what!... This morning I found that I could wash myself without help, and I could walk… I was happy for the girls… The poor girls have so much work."

It seems like she has got over it once more.

Mr. Paco didn't say anything... He couldn't register any kind of joy or surprise. On the other hand, it wasn't necessary. The daughters, the son-in-law, even the grandchildren took the cure as the most natural thing. They argued just the same when their mother was standing and helping out as best she could as when she was seated in an oilskin chair.

Mr. Paco's love for the merry widow faded when the possibility of the new marriage he dreamed of was dashed, and, in truth, when María finally was on her death bed, he no longer had any desire to be free of her. Up to the last minute, he could not believe it. The same was true of the daughters who were used to having a dying mother after so many years. The night before she died, when she could no longer sit up in bed, María clumsily knitted a little suit for a grandson… And, as always, she couldn't do anything to prevent the habitual family arguments in her last day on Earth.

Mr. Paco acted properly at the burial with a pained expression on his face. But on returning from the cemetery, he had already forgotten her. That tiny, silent woman was such a small thing there!

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More than three weeks had passed since she was buried. And now, with no good reason for it, Mr. Paco felt her presence. He had been sensing her presence upon entering the house for several days now, and he couldn't explain why. He remembered her when she was young, and he had been proud of her; she was clean and organized like nobody else, with her black, always shiny hair twisted into a bun and those exceptionally white teeth. And the smell of cleanliness, of good cooking in her kitchen, which she herself whitewashed every Saturday, and that tranquility, that silence that she seemed to introduce wherever she went.

That day Mr. Paco realized that that was the reason… That silence… The daughters had not argued for three weeks.

They too, perhaps, sensed the dead woman.

"No…" Mr. Paco noisily blew his nose, "no… these are old men's things. It's just because I'm so old now".

Nevertheless, it could not be denied that the daughters no longer argued. Nor could it be denied that instead of leaving things for later, each one making the excuse that the urgent chore was in fact the other's, they now shared the tasks, and the house ran much more smoothly. Mr. Paco, perhaps for that reason, or perhaps because he was getting old, as he thought, was at home more and he had taken a shine to one of his grandsons.

He took a few steps in the hallway, feeling the warmth of a spot of sun on his nose and neck, as he went through it; he pushed open the kitchen door, remaining dazzled in the doorway for a few moments.

The kitchen was white and gleaming just as in the first years of their marriage. The plates were on the table. The son-in-law was eating, and, something never seen before, the unmarried daughter was serving him, while her sister was busy with the two snotty-nosed children… That was so strange that it made him cough.

"This is pretty different. Have you noticed, Mr. Paco?"

The son-in law was happy with those walls that smelled of whitewash.

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Mr. Paco looked at his daughters. It seemed to him as though he had not looked at them for years. Without knowing why, he said that they were beginning to look like their mother.

"Don't they wish! Mrs. María was a saint."

That idea got into Mr. Paco's head, while he was eating his soup, slowly, silently. The idea launched by the son-in-law that the dead woman had been a saint.

"The truth, father," one of the daughters said suddenly, "is that we cannot know how some people manage to stay alive. Poor mother didn't ever do anything besides suffering and putting up with everything… I would like to know what good it did her to live like that and die without ever enjoying any of the pleasures of life…"

Nothing was said after that. Mr. Paco did not feel like answering, nor did anyone else… But it seemed like in that luminous kitchen there was something like an answer, like a smile, something…

Mr. Paco sighed again with feeling, after wiping his mouth with the napkin.

While he put on his coat to go out again, his daughters whispered about him in the kitchen.

"Did you notice father?... He is getting old. Did you notice the way he looked, like he was stunned, after eating? He didn't even notice when Pepe left…"

Mr. Paco could hear them. Yes, he didn't know what was happening to him either. But he couldn't ignore the evidence...He was feeling the dead woman close to him again. It wasn't terrible. It was warm, infinitely consoling. Something inexpressible. Right now, as he wound the scarf around his neck, it was as though her hands were tying it lovingly… Just like in old times… Perhaps that was why she had lived and died, as she did, suffering and smiling, insignificant and magnificent. Saint… in order to return to everything and to everyone and console them after her death.

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1. RT/TC 001 (2019). "A Letter of Federico García Lorca to his Parents, 1935". Author: Federico García Lorca (Spain); Translator: Christopher Maurer; Genre: Letter.

2. RT/TC 002 (2019). "Like a Night with Legs Wide Open". Author: José Alcántara Almánzar (Dominican Republic); Translator: Luis Guzmán Valerio; Genre: Short Story.

3. RT/TC 003 (2019). "In the Parks, at Dusk" and "I Only Think of You". Author: Marina Mayoral (Spain); Translator: María Socorro Suárez Lafuente; Genre: Short Story.

4. RT/TC 004 (2020). "The Guide through Death" and "The Fat Lady". Author: Guadalupe Dueñas (Mexico); Translator: Josie Hough; Genre: Short Story.

5. RT/TC 005 (2020). "The Case of the Unfaithful Translator". Author: José María Merino (Spain); Translator: Erin Goodman; Genre: Short Story.

6. RT/TC 006 (2020). "The Guerrilla Fighter" and "May as Well Call it Quits". Author: Albalucía Ángel Marulanda (Colombia); Translator: Daniel Steele Rodríguez; Genre: Short Story.

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8. RT/TC 008 (2020). "On the Road to Houmt Souk". Author: Soledad Puértolas (Spain); Translator: Francisca González Arias; Genre: Short Story.

9. RT/TC 009 (2020). *Rincón de Traductores / Translators' Corner – Volume 1: Compilation 2019-2020*. Various Authors; Various Translators.

10. RT/TC 010 (2020). *Waiting for the Revolution: Cuba, the Unfinished Journey* (excerpt). Author: Gustavo Gac-Artigas (Chile); Translator: Andrea G. Labinger; Genre: Chronicle.

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11. RT/TC 011 (2020). "A Bad Girl". Author: Montserrat Ordóñez (Colombia); Translator: Clara Eugenia Ronderos; Genre: Short Story.

12. RT/TC 012 (2020). "Claudia and the Cats". Author: Ivanna Chapeta (Guatemala); Translator: Lindsay Romanoff Bartlett; Genre: Short Story.

13. RT/TC 013 (2021). *Song of Being and Nonbeing*. Author: Santiago Alba Rico (Spain); Translator: Carolina Finley Hampson; Genre: Poetry.

14. RT/TC 014 (2021). "Christmas Eve in the Hills of Jaruco". Author: Robert F. Lima Rovira and Robert Lima (Cuba/USA); Translator: Robert lima; Genre: Chronicle.

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16. RT/TC 016 (2021). *A Manifesto for reading* (excerpt). Author: Irene Vallejo (Spain); Translator: Erin Goodman; Genre: Essay.

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