



TRANSLATORS' RINCÓN de TRADUCTORES CORNER



“The Guide through Death” *and* “The Fat Lady”
by Guadalupe Dueñas

translated by
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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]* 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.



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-incrusted 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)



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.

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". 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. Lingered 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).