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## Literary Translation in the Digital Age

Preparado por

Frances Riddle

Buenos Aires, Argentina

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## INTRODUCTION

*Translation is stigmatized as a form of writing, discouraged by copyright law, depreciated by the academy, exploited by publishers and corporations, governments and religious organizations. Translation is treated so disadvantageously, I want to suggest, partly because it occasions revelations that question the authority of dominant cultural values and institutions. And like every challenge to established reputations, it provokes their efforts at damage control, their various policing functions, all designed to shore up the questioned values and institutions by mystifying their uses of translation (Venuti, 1997:1).*

What is now infamously known as the “Three Percent Problem” describes the fact that only three of every one hundred books published in the U.S. and Great Britain annually are works in translation from another language. Some experts say that 3% is an overestimate and that the number of translations published each year in English may actually be less than 1% of the total. The U.S. exports its cultural products on a massive scale through television series, movies, music and books, but assimilates foreign cultural artifacts at a rate that pales in comparison. The fact that the U.S. has ideologically closed its borders to any outside influence has been called cultural suicide by some. Whatever the consequences for U.S. culture may be, the implications for literature in translation to English are clear: translations hold a markedly subordinate position in a publishing industry that largely ignores works of foreign literature. The few titles that are chosen for translation generally adhere to the aesthetics of the domestic market and stereotyped notions of the source culture.

The secondary status of foreign literature in the U.S. goes hand in hand with the subordinate position of the translator and Translation Studies as a whole. In her introduction to the third edition of *Translation Studies*, Susan Bassnet states that the field, in 2002, was still considered “merely a minor branch of comparative literary study, a

specific area of linguistics” (Bassnet, 2002:1). Echoing Bassnet’s affirmations, Lawrence Venuti states:

*Translation is rarely considered a form of literary scholarship, it does not currently constitute a qualification for an academic appointment in a particular field or area of literary study, and, compared to original compositions, translated texts are infrequently made the object of literary research. The fact of translation tends to be ignored even by the most sophisticated scholars who must rely on translated texts in their research and teaching. And when translation isn’t simply ignored, it is likely to suffer a wholesale reduction to linguistic correctness, especially by foreign language academics who repress the domestic remainder that any translation releases and so refuse to regard it as a conveyor of literary values in the target culture (Venuti, 1997: 32).*

If literary translators are underpaid and unrecognized the world over, with few exceptions, this is especially true for translators of any language into English, where any small trace of the translator’s intervention in the text is considered negative and the translation is made to read as fluently as possible in order to ensure easy consumption by a mass audience. Target-driven translation, also called fluent or domesticizing translation, is not seen as a problem for many translators and editors who happily seek “naturalness” in the translations they work with. If this model is not simply accepted at face value however, a deeper look shows that domesticized translations help to maintain the subordinate position of translated literature. The fluency model directly contributes to the gross underrepresentation of foreign literature within the U.S. publishing industry and perpetuates U.S. society’s general disinterest in foreign cultures. This model also furthers a lack of respect for the art of translation and justifies the meager rates afforded to literary translators.

It is difficult for a translator to break with the prevailing translation norms of their time because doing so often results in criticism or rejection. The introduction to “*Translation, History and Culture, A Sourcebook*,” states:

*If translators do not stay within the perimeters of the acceptable as defined by the patron (an absolute monarch, for instance, but also a publisher’s editor), the chances are that their translation will either not reach the audience they want it to reach or that it will, at best, reach that audience in a circuitous manner. (...) To make a foreign work of literature acceptable to the receiving culture, translators will often adapt it to the poetics of that receiving culture (Lefevere, 1990: 6).*

The fluency model of literary translation to English has dictated the work of the translator for many decades but there is evidence to suggest that these norms may be shifting. As Michael Henry Heim states, “The current concern among translators to convey cultural difference stems from postmodernism’s concern with alterity, its tendency to highlight, indeed to privilege the ‘other’” (Heim, 2008). The main objective of the present study is to analyze the current practices in the translation of literature from Spanish to English. I would like to examine the state of affairs in the U.S. publishing industry with specific emphasis on how globalization and the emergence of the Digital Age may be inciting changes in literary translation. It is undeniable that translation plays a major role in globalization but it could also be argued that globalization has an influence on translation. As each new generation is born into an increasingly globalized world, individuals are more aware of what lies beyond the political borders of the nation in which they reside. Today young adults and teenagers in the U.S. may watch a cartoon from Japan, a viral music video from Sweden, and a telenovela from Brazil, all within the space of an hour without standing up from their computer terminal. As Ben Rosenthal, editor at an educational publishing house in the U.S. stated in an article for *Publishing Perspectives*:

*The need for diverse, international perspectives should always be a priority, and it only becomes more important with the rise of digital publishing and the breakdown*

*of territorial borders. The future of publishing might see territories disappear. Publishing successful authors from other countries will make a publisher all that more attractive worldwide* (Rosenthal, 2013).

The exploration of recent trends in Translation Studies which emphasize the role of the translator in the representation of the source culture are best studied through the perspective of literary translation due to the wealth of cultural elements expressed in literary forms of writing. This study will examine nine works of short fiction in translation from Spanish to English. I have selected my corpus from three digital publications which are all dedicated to literature in translation. I hope to determine whether more recent translations, published in journals committed to furthering diversity in English language literature, will adhere to the model of domesticized translations, or instead favor a source-oriented approach. The nine translations selected will be compared to their corresponding source texts to form a bilingual corpus of eighteen texts. I would like to analyze the ways in which the digital revolution in publishing and the increased contact between cultures facilitated by the Digital Age, among other factors, may be working to undermine the predominance of the fluency model of translation to English.

## THEORHETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Defining Culture

*When we speak of “a culture” or “the receiving culture,” we would do well to remember that cultures are not monolithic entities, but that there is always a tension inside a culture between different groups, or individuals, who want to influence the evolution of that culture in the way they think best* (Lefevere, 1990: 6).

Within the context of Spanish language literature in translation to English, the present study will examine one of the most disputed issues in Translation Studies today: the maintenance

of the source culture in a work of translation. The term “culture” will be used a lot in this paper as we discuss the challenges faced by translators in communicating certain terms and concepts across languages. The original use of “culture” was applied to things that were constructs of man, in opposition to something organic or found in nature. In the mid-1800s, as anthropologists began to study indigenous societies, the definition of the word shifted to become more synonymous with the term “civilized.” A cultured person was someone versed in manmade institutions such as literature, music and the arts. From there the word began to be used as an umbrella term for these areas of knowledge.

Theories of the 1960s and 70s defined culture as the collective beliefs and behaviors that were typical of a given group of people. The basis of this perspective was that cultures are “coherent wholes: that they are logically consistent, highly integrated, consensual, extremely resistant to change, and clearly bounded” (Sewell, 2004: 89). This view has since been widely disputed as newer research shows that groups of people are actually quite heterogeneous and therefore resist such strict classifications. In the 1980s and 90s new theories emerged which understood culture as illogical, asymmetrical and dynamic, shaped by power, struggle, change and conscious choice. William Sewell considers the term today as having two main meanings. One definition of culture is used to refer to manmade constructs such as literature and the arts. The second sense of the term labels a group of people, often those that share a national or ethnic identity. Sewell proposes a new view of culture which combines both culture as a system and culture as practice. He states that:

*It is no longer possible to assume that the world is divided into distinct “societies,” each with its corresponding and well-integrated “culture” (...) but (this idea) gets at something we need to retain: a sense of the particular shapes and consistencies of*

*worlds of meaning in different places and times and a sense that in spite of conflicts and resistance, these worlds of meaning somehow hang together* (Sewell, 2004: 93).

In her 2009 paper on the concept of world culture Kathryn Anderson-Levitt argues that today, ideas are often shared across group boundaries and therefore cultures should not be ascribed to nations or ethnicities. She views culture today as global, since any concept, belief, or norm has the potential to encompass individuals anywhere in the world. Anderson-Levitt states:

*From the perspective of the world's population, it does not make sense to classify the world into distinct national or regional or even local cultures; rather, some anthropologists propose that we envision the world as a single ecumene, in which cultural meanings are shared across networks that may be local but that often span the globe* (Anderson-Levitt, 2009).

For Anderson-Levitt the use of the term “culture” to refer to a supposedly cohesive group is propagated by the fact that collective identities are often deliberately and strategically constructed. Anderson-Levitt maintains that culture is shaped by those in positions of power and meaning is not “constructed and traded in a cultural free market; (...) it is a contest played out on uneven ground” (Anderson-Levitt, 2009). She points out that the means of spreading ideas and shaping habits, held by publishing industries, prestigious universities, and research institutes, are concentrated in the world’s wealthiest nations who therefore hold the lion’s share of cultural influence. The prestige associated with these nations attracts the best and brightest from less powerful nations in a process known as “brain drain.” Power is an important factor to consider when discussing culture because economic and political influence plays an important role in determining which ideas are diffused and accepted by individuals. An example of this can be seen in the fluency model of translation to English, imposed by the “Big Five” publishing conglomerates that are able



to dictate the norms of the English language publishing industry thanks to their economic strength.

### The Death of the Author

Famously proclaimed by Roland Barthes in 1968, the “death of the author” proposed a radical departure from the prevailing literary theories of the time which maintained that a text’s identity was static, defined by its syntax and language. “For Barthes, then, codes are the forms imposed by language on reality which determine our perception of it and the text of art amounts to nothing more than a set of codes which control its production” (Di Leo, 2012). The death of the author can be seen as the birth of the text as new theories began to shape a text-centered approach to literary criticism. Barthes’ proclamation that meaning only exists through the reader’s interaction with a text had implications for translation since each translator’s individual interpretation will “yield a text with a different identity” (Di Leo, 2012). If a text may have multiple interpretations then translation is subjective and can no longer be conceived in terms of good or bad, correct or incorrect. Barthes’ legacy is the understanding that what is seen as a successful translation will vary depending on the specific context in which it is created and received. The decisions that a translator makes as they carry out their work will be affected by the prevailing theories of their time as well as the relationship between the source and target languages.

*We are no longer stuck to the word or even to the text because we have realized the importance of context in matters of translation. One context is of course that of history, the other context is that of culture. The questions that now dominate the field are able to dominate it because people in the field began to realize, some time ago, that translations are never produced in a vacuum and they are never received in a vacuum (Bassnett and Lefevere, 1990: 3).*

Barthes's theories are still relevant to Translation Studies today as parallels can easily be drawn between the "tyranny of the author" and the subordinate position of translated literature. The original author of a translated text may be exalted for their genius, while the translator who worked to make that text shine in the target language is rarely given more than a passing mention.

*Whereas authorship is generally defined as originality, self-expression in a unique text, translation is derivative, neither self-expression nor unique: it imitates another text. Given the reigning concept of authorship, translation provokes the fear of inauthenticity, distortion, contamination. Yet insofar as the translator must focus on the linguistic and cultural constituents of the foreign text, translation may also provoke the fear that the foreign author is not original, but derivative, fundamentally dependent on pre-existing materials (Venuti, 1997: 31).*

Suzanne Jill Levine sees translation as an act of creative writing. She points out that the original author is constantly faced with decisions about which word or phrase to choose. The source text itself is therefore "one of many possible versions" (Levine, 199: xiii). Since all writing, whether an original or a translation, is a series of choices, translators should not be so harshly criticized for the choices that they make. Levine states that "if we recognize the borderlessness or at least continuity between translation and original, then perhaps we can begin to see the translator in another light, no longer bearing the stigma of servant or handmaiden" (Levine, 1991: 183). Venuti similarly calls for new thinking on the idea of authorship:

*because translating is intercultural, it involves a distinct kind of authorship, secondary to the foreign text and in the service of different communities, foreign as well as domestic. The only authority that translation can expect depends on its remaining derivative, distinguishable from the original compositions that it tries to communicate, and collective, remaining open to the other agents who influence it, especially domestic readerships. Hence, the only prestige that a translator can gain comes from practicing translation, not as a form of personal expression, but as a collaboration between divergent groups, motivated by an acknowledgement of the linguistic and cultural differences that translation necessarily rewrites and reorders (Venuti, 1997: 4).*

Di Leo underscores the correlations drawn by Barthes between the cult of the author and capitalism. When the author is revered, their productions are considered a hot commodity and profits increase. Barthes's theories did a lot to expand our views on the text but a look around the literary world today reveals that the author is still very much alive and well. Author websites, blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter feeds bring readers closer to an author's public persona than ever before. Today, anyone who can string a few sentences together and navigate Amazon's self-publishing platform is able to become a legitimized author. The many magazines and webpages dedicated to advice for writer now include topics such as "how to build your author platform," "how to extend your brand," and "why you should tell your origin story." Even deceased writers live on through posthumous publications; as Di Leo (2012) states, "The sovereignty of the dead in aesthetics has less to do with mourning—and more to do with money." The cult of the author and the fluency model of translation combine to ensure that – in the very rare chance that a translation becomes a bestseller – the original author will be revered while the translator is completely ignored.

### The Birth of Translation Studies

In her 2012 paper "Translation studies at a cross-roads," Susan Bassnet describes her experience as a translation scholar during the inception of Translation Studies as a legitimate field of research.

*The Seventies was a decade of huge intellectual ferment in the arts and humanities, characterised above all by a series of challenges from different quarters to the established literary canon. (...) cultural studies highlighted the significance of class and ethnic identity in the production and reception of texts, the author was declared dead, the role of the reader rose into prominence with attendant psycho-socio*

*baggage, deconstruction showed dimensions of reading that called into question all manner of early assumptions* (Bassnet, 2012).

As one of the breakthrough studies that incited a rupture from the established canon, Bassnet cites the work of Even-Zohar and his polysystems theory. She explains her excitement as she listened to Even-Zohar describe the historically subordinate position of translated literature and the radical revision of history which he proposed from this new perspective. Even-Zohar coined the term “polysystems” to describe the framework of systems that structure reality. Under this theory, all forms of human expression are seen as signs of some sort, whether cultural, political, linguistic, literary, scientific, etc., which are organized into systems. The literary polysystem of a given culture is made up of all the genres, models, and themes that may influence the system. Elements from outside a given system, including other cultures, may innovate or subvert the literary system. The polysystems theory pits the universal, at the center of the polysystem, against the peripheral, which lies in the margins and therefore receives less attention. This is a flexible, fluctuating system and as the accepted norms of a given time and place shift, the central placeholder may be displaced by a peripheral theme.

At the center of a literary polysystem lie mainstream works that will receive the most attention and generate the most profits, books that would be known as bestsellers. While translated literature generally remains in the periphery of the polysystem, it is possible for a translated work to become a bestseller. In translation from Spanish to English, Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Carlos Ruíz Zafón’s *La Sombra del Viento* and Tomás Eloy Martínez’s *Santa Evita* have all made it onto the *New York Times*’ bestseller list. According to Lawrence Venuti, the quest for the next bestseller

is what drives the fluency model of translation to English. He claims that the prevailing trend in literary translation towards fluency in the target language is based on capitalist values of consumption that convert a foreign text into a commodity that must be tailored to the target market in order to maximize profits. Venuti states that a text in translation can only make huge profits in the target culture when “it meets the expectations that currently prevail in the domestic culture (...) a bestselling translation tends to reveal much more about the domestic culture for which it was produced, than the foreign culture which it is taken to represent” (Venuti, 1997: 124-125). Since the bestseller reaches a vast and heterogeneous audience, it will be interpreted in many different ways. Therefore translation strategies that allow the text to appeal to the broadest possible readership are employed. A text translated to English usually includes strategies that favor “linear syntax, unequivocal meaning, current usage, lexical consistency; they eschew unidiomatic constructions, polysemy, archaism, jargon, any linguistic effect that calls attention to the words as words and therefore preempts or interrupts the reader’s identification” (Venuti, 1997: 126-127). When maximization of profit is the main goal, the texts selected by editors for translation will be those that fit the preexisting domestic aesthetic values and the accepted stereotypes of the foreign culture. In this way domesticized translations will rarely work to innovate a polysystem or shift the position of translated literature away from the margins and into the center.

### The Role of the Translator

Within the field of Translation Studies, as the focus shifted away from the text itself, thanks to theorists such as Roland Barthes, greater attention was given to the translator and the ways in which the ideologies of the time affect their work. This paved the way for the cultural turn in Translation Studies of the 1980s and 1990s. Many debates have emerged from the cultural turn, regarding patronage, poetics, and ethics, but perhaps the most divisive issue centers on the visibility of the translator. On one side of the aisle sit theorists such as Norman Shapiro who believe that “A good translation is like a pane of glass (...) it should never call attention to itself” (Shapiro in Venuti, 1995: 14). Shapiro argues in favor of completely fluent translations that can be understood as easily as possible by the target reader, as if the text had originally been written in English. On the other side of the debate, the work of Lawrence Venuti stands out as he argues adamantly in favor of the translator’s visibility in the target text through techniques that draw the target reader’s attention to the source language and culture. According to Venuti, since the source and target cultures imply two distinct social contexts, the fluency model, which aims to domesticize a foreign text for easier consumption, derives in an unfaithful representation of the original because it “produces an effect of transparency, whereby the translated text is taken to represent the foreign author's personality or intention or the essential meaning of his text” (Venuti, 1995: 16). Venuti’s opinion on what makes a good translation contrasts starkly with many theorists. For Venuti, “Good translation is minoritizing: it releases the remainder by cultivating a heterogeneous discourse, opening up the standard dialect and literary canons to what is foreign to themselves, to the substandard and the marginal” (Venuti, 1998: 11). In the famous “call to action” section of Venuti’s 1995 book, *The Translator’s Invisibility*, he urges translators to insert foreignizing elements into their translated texts as a means of resistance against the homogenizing effects that fluent translation has on the U.S. book

market and English speaking culture as a whole. In Venuti's words, translators "can work to revise the individualistic concept of authorship that has banished translation to the fringes of Anglo-American culture" (Venuti, 1995:311).

David Bellos traces the roots of the contemporary fluency model to a commercially successful translation of *The Odyssey*, published by Penguin Classics shortly after WWII. This version was written in a simple, straightforward style and promoted the idea that the classics should be made available to everyone. Classicist scholars were rejected as translators for this series since their versions proved too academic for a mainstream audience. A strict house style was imposed on the translations in the Penguin Classics series to ensure that all texts read in a natural, accessible English. "This series certainly did educate millions, and is undoubtedly one of the historical sources of the strong preference in English-language translation for adaptive, normalizing, or domesticating styles," (Bellos, 2011). Bellos further states that the commonly-accepted notion that the classics need to be updated through retranslation every generation is driven in fact by "international copyright laws and the commercial interests it creates" (Bellos, 2011).

Many translation theorists and practitioners criticize foreignization for a host of reasons. Some, such as Clifford E. Landers argue that since it's in a foreign author's best interest to be translated to English, they should accept the fact that their work must undergo a domesticizing process to ensure positive reception by the audience they want to access. Landers points out that English speaking readers are generally intolerant of anything that sounds less than natural in a translated text and will therefore either criticize the translator for a non-fluent translation or deem the author inaccessible. Landers subscribes to the "pane

of glass metaphor” which holds that the translator “should invisibly transmit the author’s style” (Landers, 2001:51). He describes translators who diverge from the fluency model, which he calls “resistance theory,” in the following way:

*Translators who follow resistance theory deliberately avoid excluding any elements that betray the ‘otherness’ of the text’s origin and may even consciously seek them out. Smoothness and transparency are therefore undesirable and even marks of a colonizing mentality. The reduced readability of the final product is an indication of its fidelity to the source language and the culture in which it originated. Advocates of resistance might be termed the radical fringe of literary translation (Landers, 2001: 52).*

Foreignization undoubtedly holds the potential to produce an inaccessible text that will be rejected by readers. However, certain studies show that overly fluent translations may alienate readers as well. In her syntactic analysis of translated texts, Mairi McLaughlin uncovered several linguistic characteristics which were common to fluent translations. Her analysis shows “that the syntax of translation is characterized by hypercorrection towards the target norm through an increased use of stereotypical features” (McLaughlin, 2011). McLaughlin believes that the employment of overused terms and expressions, as well as the tendency towards traditional and generic structures, may be hindering the widespread acceptance of works in translation. David Bellos cites research which reaffirms McLaughlin’s findings. He states that fluent translations “tend to write in a normalized language and are more attentive to what is broadly understood to be the correct or standard form (...) a normalized idea of what the target language should be” (Bellos, 2011). McLaughlin concludes that “the hypernormal language may in fact contribute to the low status held by translation in the contemporary Western polysystem” (McLaughlin, 2011). McLaughlin’s results suggest that readers are more accepting of the idiosyncrasies of an individual foreign author’s way of expressing themselves than editors generally believe. Her study builds a precedent for the idea that readers may actually prefer a work which



conveys an author's unique voice rather than the watered down versions which are characteristic of fluent translations. McLaughlin hopes that less fluent translations will increasingly become the norm.

Suzanne Jill Levine believes that translation should expose elements that are missing from the target language but present in the source language. She states that “One becomes more conscious of the mother tongue’s mechanisms by experiencing it from without, and now finds something missing” (Levine, 1991:1). For Levine, a good translation will “seek out, stress the common but hidden bonds that may exist between two languages, two cultures, two puns. Through its synonymous movement translation too lays bare a potential of the original text in another language” (1991:14). Levine does not seem to be fully in favor of foreignizing translation however, as she argues that this model causes an effect in the target text that is not present in the original. She points to the case of using Latinate words in English for translations from Spanish, such as translating the Spanish “amable” for “amiable” in English. Levine believes that the use of the Latin term in English produces an effect of opaqueness for the English reader whereas “amable” is a very vibrant word in the Spanish language. In her book *The Subversive Scribe* (1991), Levine argues that we should view translation as a creative collaboration between author and translator. The title of her book references the “battle cry” of translators since the 1960s who have sought to subvert the traditional notions of fidelity and betrayal. What some would call infidelities, Levine sees as deliberate subversions, conscious acts of rebellion against theories that limit the translator’s role as creative writer. Levine calls attention to the subordinate position of Latin American literature within Spanish language writing. For many of the Latin American writers that Levine has translated, the use of colloquial

language was important to their writing as it symbolized a “filial revolt against the paternal tyranny of Castilian Spanish” (Levine, 1991:9). Levine emphasizes the translator’s role as the mediator between two cultures and two socio-political contexts. She argues strongly against the fluency model which “ruthlessly censures” the subordinate culture.

### Spanish Language Literature in the U.S.

The present study aims to focus on how the previously-mentioned theories relate specifically to Spanish language literature in translation to English. Richard Kagan provides a history of the perception of Hispanic culture in the United States, going back to the 1800s when the U.S. annexation of Spanish territories gave rise to a sense of U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere. He explains how Hispanist scholars such as Washington Irving

*articulated an American identity antithetically, by defining Spain as the US’s own negative—as Catholic, stagnant, idle, and picturesque—while the occasional Spanish hero is made to appear utterly un-Spanish and, thus, “looking forward” to eventually becoming an American (Kagan, 2002: 7).*

Kristen Silva Gruesz explains how U.S. plans for expansion to Mexico correlated with a trend towards fluent translation. She describes this process as “a shift from the fraternal rhetoric that had informed the Monroe Doctrine toward the feminization of Latin America as a weak object of US conquest” (Gruesz, 2004). Gruesz argues strongly against domesticization and its homogenizing forces, calling for “strong revision of literary-historical narratives of the US national tradition that render the Latino presence ghostly and peripheral” (Gruesz, 2004).

In an attempt to reverse the low prestige of Spanish language and its cultures, the journal *Hispania* was formed in 1917 by the American Association of Teachers of Spanish. It was not until the middle of the twentieth century however, with the so-called “Latin American Boom,” that Spanish language literature began to develop a meaningful presence in the United States. In her essay “A Tale of Two Translation Programs,” Deborah Cohn tells of how the increased interest in Hispanic literature and culture was prompted by U.S. political interest in Latin America. Cohn details the way in which two translation programs, funded by the Rockefeller family and backed by the U.S. government, facilitated the “Latin American boom” in the U.S. publishing industry. The programs provided funding for translations and worked to promote Latin American writers within the United States. However, these programs were not free from the U.S. political agenda of improving relations with Latin American intellectuals in the wake of Cold War conflicts with Cuba. As the organizer of one of the programs stated, “artists and intellectuals in Latin America do not represent the cultural frosting of the community, but are an important part of the mainstream of political activity and development. Their contribution is important, and largely overlooked” (Joseph Slater in Cohn, 2006). The two translation programs were founded on the hope that influential Latin American writers whose work was welcomed in the United States would develop positive impressions of the nation which they would take back with them and disperse in their home countries.

Analysis of these programs provides insight into how the market for Latin American literature was created in the United States. Before the 1950’s, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. was one of the only publishers of literature from Latin America. Since Latin American authors were little-known to the average U.S. reader, most publishing houses shied away from the

extensive cost and financial risk of publishing translations from the region. In 1956, a consultant for the Rockefeller Foundation, dedicated to fostering goodwill between the U.S. and Latin America, suggested a grant program that would subsidize the cost of translation and encourage publishers' interest in literature from the region. The Foundation targeted university presses but the plan did not immediately take off, as evidenced by a petition to renew funding a year later, stating "If the effort can be continued for another four years, we believe that the North American view of Latin American literature can be transformed" (From the Rockefeller Fund Archives in Cohn, 2006).

In 1962 the Center for Inter-American Relations, known as "the Center," was founded by Rodman Rockefeller. This program aimed not only to fund translations but also to represent Latin American authors commercially, promote their work, and encourage publishers to take a more active role in finding and publishing Latin American literature. The program saw rapid success in its goals to "recommend new books, commission objective critical commentary and sample translations, act as informal agent for the author in question if needed, and help a young author establish the necessary contacts which in many cases lead to translation and eventual publication" (Center for Inter-American Relations 1969: 14–15 in Cohn, 2006). The Center additionally served as the nexus between translators and publishers, helped train new translators, and subsidized translations with up to \$2,500 per title. Throughout the 1960s the Center worked full time to create reputations for Latin American writers and publicize Latin American literature in the United States. They introduced writers to critics, scholars, and publishers and hosted press conferences and readings. They also used their connections to assure publication of shorter works in high-profile journals and magazines such as *The New Yorker*. The Center

succeeded in gaining recognition for many writers, such as Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, Julio Cortázar, and Octavio Paz. The most notable success was Gregory Rabassa's translation of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* which first made the bestsellers lists of both the *New York Times* and *Publisher's Weekly* in 1970. The Center also did a lot to further the professionalization of translators who worked as agents for the writers they translated. Before the intervention of these programs, the very narrow market for Latin American literature in translation to English was dominated by Knopf. Harriet de Onis, the publisher's principal translator of works from Spanish and Portuguese had a markedly adaptive translation style. The new translators who were trained by the Center were younger and more in tune with the styles of the contemporary writers they were translating. They often worked closely with authors and were interested in capturing the true spirit of the original works.

These two Rockefeller-funded programs left a lasting mark on the publishing industry where translation of Latin American literature is concerned. Thanks to these efforts many mainstream publishing houses opened their doors to Latin American literature, such as Doubleday, Dutton, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, Grove, Harcourt, Brace, and Pantheon (Cohn, 2006). These programs laid the foundation for contact between foreign authors and U.S. publishers and set the standards for the marketing of foreign authors. The work of these programs, especially the Center, can be credited with creating an audience for Latin American writers in the United States. It is clear that these two programs were initiated as a political move to influence Latin American perceptions of the United States. However, Deborah Cohn maintains that the programs:

*sought to uphold the freedom of the individual artist as a contrast to the U.S.S.R.'s restrictions on intellectuals' liberties. No ideological restrictions were placed on the works or authors supported by the Literature Program. Over the years, the Center subsidized numerous authors who had allied themselves with Cuba and the Left, including García Márquez, as well as Asturias, Cortázar, Donoso, and even Neruda. And on several occasions, the Center lobbied the highest levels of U.S. government on behalf of writers such as Fuentes and Angel Rama, who encountered difficulties getting visas to enter or remain in the United States due to the McCarran-Walter Act, which was used to restrict visas on ideological grounds (Cohn, 2006).*

Despite Cohn's defense of these programs, they are often criticized by scholars. María Eugenia Mudrovic denounces the Rockefeller translation programs for destroying the autonomy of culture by determining which titles would be translated, selecting the translators, and using their influence to make sure works would be well-received. Mudrovic sees this as an example of the "monopoly of art inherent in the system of literary patronage" (Mudrovic, 2002 in Cohn, 2006). Mudrovic argues that without the intervention of these translation programs, Latin American literature in translation to English would today exhibit a wider variety of styles and genres. Others, such as Cohn, counter that without the intervention of these programs it is quite likely that Latin American literature would have taken much longer to gain even a small foothold in the U.S. book market. Cohn states that these two programs were responsible for the "canon formation (that) took place in the interaction between large audiences and gatekeeper intellectuals" (Cohn, 2006). While the Center's work has been criticized as exerting an unfair influence over cultural productions, their power was still not enough to open the U.S. book market to translations in the long term. The fact that the Foundation, which focused on university presses, saw much less success than the Center, which targeted mainstream publishers, shows that market forces probably had a significant role in the programs' successes. The recent "Mini Boom" of Latin American literature in translation has been attributed to a

growing openness to foreign culture facilitated by our increasingly globalized and connected world. However, the first “Latin American Boom” canonized many Latin American writers and the seeds sown during this period undoubtedly influence the way newer generations of Latin American writers are perceived by U.S. audiences.

### Bilingualism in the U.S.

While Latin American literature experienced a growth in popularity in the latter half of the twentieth century, many Hispanist scholars argue that cultural production from this region is still grossly underrepresented considering the large population of Hispanic immigrants that reside in the United States. In “Alien Speech Incorporated,” a cultural history of Spanish in the U.S., Kristen Silva Gruesz explains that although Spanish has become the most spoken and also the most widely studied foreign language in the U.S., this increased popularity has not brought with it a rise in prestige.

*This contemporary status problem did not come into being suddenly during the last three decades, when the population of US Latinos began to spike; it was shaped over the centuries by modulating ideas about the domesticity and foreignness of certain registers of Spanish, including the highly particularized register of literary language. These modulations are significant not only for the Latino branch of ethnic studies; they are embedded, I will argue, into the mainstream history of ideas about language and languages in America (Gruesz 2013).*

Ideologies associated with a given language have repercussions, not only for the reception of its culture but for how the speakers of that language are perceived. Commonly-shared notions about any given foreign culture often have political implications. The strict policies aimed to limit immigration from Hispanic countries, as well as widespread negative

attitudes towards immigrants from Latin America, are proof of Hispanic culture's secondary status in the eyes of many U.S. citizens.

In "Translation: A Keyword into the Language of America(nists)," by Kirsten Silva Gruesz, Americanist scholarship is criticized for overlooking works written within the United States in languages other than English. Gruesz presents several reasons for Americanist literary scholarship to broaden its horizons. Firstly, she argues that while shifts in American Studies have opened the way for a plurality of voices, including that of the Latino, works written in languages other than English are almost entirely overlooked. She criticizes the hypocrisy of "the *monolingual* logic of so-called *multiculturalism*" (Gruesz, 2004.) Gruesz states that the field of American Studies seems to be declaring its non-elitism by its expansion to include non-standard dialects of English. However, Americanist scholarship continues to focus wholly on English, despite the growing number of U.S. immigrants who write in other languages.

Spanglish, defined by Ilan Stavans, as "the verbal encounter between Anglo and Hispano civilizations" (Stavans, 2003 in Rothman and Rell, 2005), is a defining feature of the language of the U.S. Hispanic population. Spanglish is abhorred by some, such as Octavio Paz, who famously called it a "gross deformation" (Paz in Perez, 2007). Perez however sees language change as positive, stating that "Latino literature is already making the English language vibrate in a different way, and therein lies its revolutionary, active force" (Perez 2007). Perez further states that minor literature, such as Latino writing, is more likely to push the limits of U.S. literature, thus transforming and enriching it.



*At one level, the linguistic mestizaje of Latino literature functions as a weapon in the struggle against marginalization, while at another as a confrontation with the major language(s): actively creating new forms of American expression, moving forward, never looking back as their predecessors once did—to something like the barroco as the origin of their cultural and literary identity (Perez, 2007).*

In their paper “A linguistic analysis of Spanglish: relating language to identity,” Rothman and Rell show that Spanglish as well as code switching are both systematic and structured, debunking the myth that this use of language “is haphazard and hence of little value” (Rothman and Rell, 2005). They explain code-switching as a sign of highly proficient bilingual individuals and describe its use as a way for a specific group of people to communicate more effectively through the choice of one language over another. Spanglish serves as a badge of membership to a group that has the ability to play with language in a specific way. As stated by Soler “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language” (Soler 1999: 276 in Rothman and Rell, 2005). Hispanic immigrants find their identity in flux as they integrate into U.S. culture, “This new identity, source of cultural strength and survival, needs a new language and Spanglish is the result” (Soler, 1999: 275 in Rothman and Rell, 2005).

*Tongue Ties*, the title of Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s 2003 book, holds a double meaning which represents the idea that being bilingual means more than speaking two languages; it signifies an attachment to two tongues and being torn between them. The choice to write in one language over the other often feels like a betrayal. For example, a Cuban immigrant living in the U.S. who chooses to write in English will be shunned from the world of Cuban literature but at the same time, if that writer chooses to write instead in Spanish, they will likely never be published in the United States. The Latino writer seems to be marginalized

no matter where they turn, from the English and the Spanish canon at the same time.

Rolando Perez explains that:

*just as his/her confrontation with English represents a lucha, a political struggle with the language of her/his present economic marginalization, the confrontation with Spanish is no less political—that being a struggle against the language of empire. To that extent, then, the Spanish of Latino/a writers functions by deterritorializing, decolonizing, the imperial Castilian, making Latino literature as a "minor literature," a revolutionary literature (...) the Latino writer is no purist. He or she understands that language is primarily affective, and, as a result, often switches back and forth from English to Spanish in a way that makes English vibrate in a certain kind of way (Perez, 2007).*

Immigrants today are more connected to their homeland than ever before thanks to the speed and ease of communication and travel. The enormous population of Hispanics, estimated at over 50 million, form tight-knit communities in the U.S. where they are able to maintain their native language and culture as they assimilate into their adopted homes. Many U.S. residents of Hispanic heritage become bilingual and bicultural. The Hispanic population of the U.S. is fast-growing with an ever-increasing educational level and buying power, facts that have not escaped the attention of marketing experts. As an executive of a U.S. based Spanish language television channel states,

*It seems apparent that the media as well as the economic interests that fund its existence have converged on the same conclusion as far as the Hispanic community and Spanglish is concerned. Not only are they aware that the Hispanic community is a crucial consumer group whose collective buying power rivals that of any other minority group, but they also realize that a key part of reaching and identifying with this community is through Spanglish (Rothman and Rell, 2005).*

Immigrant writing seems to have become widely accepted in the U.S. in a very short period of time, maybe for the reason stated by Junot Díaz, “They’re so happy to claim me as literature because it makes them all look better” (Díaz in Céspedes and Torres-Saillant, 2000). Cuban writer Oscar Hijuelos was the first Latin American writer to win the Pulitzer

Prize in 1990 and the prize was also awarded to immigrant writers Jhumpa Lahiri in 2000 and Junot Díaz in 2008. Other immigrant writers such as Cristina García and Edwidge Danticat have won numerous awards. Junot Díaz's work serves as an example of how a text may function to bring the reader closer to a foreign culture. When asked about the heavy use of Spanish words in his English language novel, *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz stated:

*allowing the Spanish to exist in my text without the benefit of italics or quotation marks was a very important political move. Spanish is not a minority language. Not in this hemisphere, not in the United States, not in the world inside my head. So why treat it like one? Why 'other' it? Why denormalize it? By keeping the Spanish as normative in a predominantly English text, I wanted to remind readers of the fluidity of languages, the mutability of languages. And to mark how steadily English is transforming Spanish and Spanish is transforming English. (...) When I learned English in the States, this was a violent enterprise. And by forcing Spanish back onto English, forcing it to deal with the language it tried to exterminate in me, I've tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page. Call it my revenge on English (Díaz in Céspedes and Torres-Saillant, 2000).*

Junot Díaz proves that foreign words do not need to hinder a fluent reading of a book. His award-winning novel mixed Spanish and English in a work laden with footnotes detailing the historical and political context of the protagonists' native Dominican Republic. Díaz has demonstrated that the presence of foreign words need not offend or confound the reader. This is in direct opposition to what is maintained by proponents of the fluency model of translation. With Díaz as an example, it could be argued that a mix of two languages makes a text culturally and linguistically richer. Mukherjee states that writers such as Junto Díaz are a reminder to the world that it must readjust its vision of what constitutes American. The concept of the changing face of America has become a cliché according to Mukherjee who states that “as the face changes, so does the character, so do the adventures, so does the language” (Mukherjee, 2011). I would further add to this statement that as the language changes, so too the literature. Immigration to the U.S. from various regions of the world has

opened the way for an increased acceptance of other voices in the literary canon which may have implications for the acceptance of literature in translation. The presence of foreign terms in widely-accepted works of literature in English may offer a starting point for the breakdown of the fluency model of translation to English. I believe this to be especially true for works written originally in Spanish because U.S. citizens are increasingly exposed to this foreign language and culture. The publishing industry is historically reluctant to change and may still be a step behind U.S. society. As Mukherjee states

*I feel that the academy has not yet developed the grid and the grammar to explore American works that are not quite “American” in a canonical sense. Such a literature possesses the one essential quality of all great writing: energy. And energy is released in the mangling and macerating of fused languages in the reckless violation of outmoded forms, and in characters pinched and pulled into supernatural shapes (Mukherjee, 2011).*

## Globalization and Translation

The poststructuralist theories that incited the cultural turn in Translation Studies focused on debunking traditional beliefs on culture, highlighting the fact that what had historically been deemed “universal” referred only to privileged white males. Mark Poster, in his 2008 study “Global Media and Culture,” states that the broadening of the scope of the term *universal* has allowed for a sense of community that has grown ever larger. Today, in our globalized world where people, ideas and commodities are able to cross borders quicker and easier than ever before, we can now truly begin to conceive of a global community. “Humans are cosmopolitan today through their everyday actions: they emigrate, they work on products used in other countries, they consume objects manufactured elsewhere, they create and use texts, images, and sounds that are globally disseminated” (Poster, 2008).

Termed *users* rather than *consumers*, individuals today can easily alter the content of digital media, thereby stepping into the role of creator. Cultural data is now seen as information shared by *peers*. This sets digital media apart from analog media with its towering production costs that create a deep gulf between producer and consumer. Analog cultural consumption promotes the celebrity status of authors and fanatic followers as the few who are allowed past the gatekeepers are lauded as extraordinary. This is what Roland Barthes was rallying against in his declaration of the death of the author, denouncing elitism and calling for a birth of creativity among readers. In today's digital world networked computing allows individuals to send audio, video and text out into the world on a massive scale. In the case of something that goes "viral" on the net, digital cultural transmissions may spread to a far broader audience than analog media is capable of reaching. In the publishing industry, e-books have removed the printing and distribution costs that have traditionally hindered the publication of literature in translation.

*Compare the material resources required for printing presses, movie production, and television transmissions to those for the networked computer, and it is apparent that a vast dissemination of cultural production is well under way, with fully one-sixth of the human population in a position to do what it took armies of cultural creators and producers to do in the modern period of analog culture* (Poster, 2008).

Poster asserts that the elitism which has traditionally dominated cultural production is quickly becoming a thing of the past, stating that "The dams are broken on the control of cultural production and its tutelage by universities, art schools, publishing houses, broadcast media—all the gatekeepers and facilitators of Western modernity" (Poster, 2008). The U.S. publishing industry has seen major changes in recent years as self-publication becomes less stigmatized thanks to the roaring success of many self-published authors. No longer seen as a last recourse for desperate, second-rate writers, self-publishing can now be considered a conscious choice taken by the savvy author to eliminate the publisher as

middleman. New companies have sprung up around the booming self-publication industry, allowing authors to contract editing, proofreading, and marketing services. On-demand printing offers low costs for high quality books and some companies include distribution to major booksellers as well.

Mark Poster speaks of global culture which makes use of the internet to share ideas. He underscores the importance of technology and digital media as he frames the issue of ethics and responsibility in a globalized world, stating:

*If the tendency of neoliberal, transnational corporations has been and continues to be to globalize the planet with their habits and ways of doing things, then the task confronting global culture is to promote something different, something that might extend democracy in unforeseen and unforeseeable directions* (Poster, 2008).

Poster sees the move towards increased globalization as a way to break down the influence of large corporations which seek to control and commodify culture on a global level. Poster is optimistic about the triumph of diversity in the face of globalization. He believes that culture today is so inherently global that it will be able to resist control by any one nation, “even a behemoth like the United States” (Poster, 2008). Poster may be overly optimistic as the 2014 Amazon-Hachette scandal showed the ways in which a gigantic globalized company like Amazon can exert influence that affects the way cultural products, in this case Hachette’s books, reach the public. While Hachette itself is a major multi-national corporation and therefore does not elicit sympathy from many, the underlying worry is that as Amazon becomes more powerful, it will be able to push ever more exacting demands onto publishers and authors. prices With Amazon currently in control of 40% of all print books and 64% of all e-books sold (Vara, 2014), it is not hard to imagine a future in which Amazon controls the sales of books to such an extent that it could drive too low for

publishers to afford printing of hard copies. While globalization may be seen as a force that opens the floodgates for a truly democratic sharing of culture, many theorists argue that the converse is actually occurring, with those that hold a dominant position exerting their influence over an ever broader area. The concern is that this could lead to a homogenized society the world over, with one culture and one way of seeing things. Hand and Sandywell state that “digitalized capitalism promises a reconstruction of the polity as an electronic global village, inaugurating processes of civic renewal, raising us into the era of *global citizenship*” (Hand and Sandywell in Poster, 2008). But they are quick to dismiss such rosy predictions as they write: “Cyberculture (...) simply builds upon and further deepens the chronic social inequalities of class, gender, and race created by the course of modern capitalism” (Hand and Sandywell in Poster, 2008).

However, the future may not be all bleak. Translation scholar Michael Cronin believes that translation “is ideally placed to understand both the transnational movement that is globalization and the transnational movement which is anti-globalization” (Cronin, 2003). He is optimistic about the prospects for our globalized world and believes that translation, far from creating a homogenous global culture, will be able to promote the diversity of cultures worldwide. As Poster points out, language diversity is extremely resistant to globalization. “One result of the spread of English is that most of the English now spoken and written in the world comes from people who do not possess it natively, making ‘English speakers’ a minority among the users of the language” (Bellos, 2011). Bellos is not concerned that the use of English for intercultural communication might diminish linguistic variety. New dialects such as Global English and Spanglish have a diversifying effect by inserting foreign elements into major languages. Bellos suggests that

the only real danger is posed to native speakers of English, who will have no reason to learn a second tongue and therefore will become (or continue to be) “less sophisticated users of language than all others since they alone will have one language in which to think” (Bellos, 2011). Changes are already taking shape in immigrant communities, which are able to integrate with the local while retaining ties to their homelands, thus creating subgroups of hybrid cultures.

Gisele Sapiro, in her study entitled “Globalization and cultural diversity in the book market” (2008), explains how the publishing industry has been reluctant to adapt to the changes offered by globalization. She points out that the history of written language has been traditionally rooted in national identity and the logistics of translation, necessary for literature to span national borders, is often too costly for publishers. Sapiro’s study analyzes globalization of the publishing industries of the U.S. and France through data gathered on published translations. For Sapiro, the variety of different source languages in a given book market indicates cultural diversity. Sapiro sees translation as a hybridizing force but points out that the flows of translations are determined by the power relations between cultures.

*Translation flows move mainly from the core to the periphery. The English language occupies a hyper-central position: about half of the translated books in the world in the 1980s were originally written in English. Translations from French, German and Russian represented 10–12% of this market until 1989, these languages thus being central. A few languages had a semi-peripheral position, accounting for 1–3% of the global market (Italian, Spanish, Polish, Danish, Swedish and Czech). The share of other languages was less than 1%; they may thus be considered peripheral (Sapiro, 2010).*

According to the core-periphery model, languages which hold a more central position will publish fewer translations whereas more marginal languages will have a far greater number of translated titles in their bookstores. The case of English fits this model as the now



infamous figure 3% represents the percentage of works in translation to English published each year. This figure contrasts dramatically with other publishing industries such as “France, where 27% of books published are in translation. And if that sounds a lot, you might care to know that in Spain it’s 28%, Turkey 40%, and Slovenia a whopping 70%” (Anderson, 2014). However, a greater awareness of this issue may be yielding a change in English-language publishing practices.

In Sapiro’s interviews with editors of smaller U.S. publishing houses, many blamed the lack of translated titles on the emergence of large conglomerates who control most of the market and whose main objective is the maximization of profit. The search for the next bestseller overshadows consideration of works by lesser-known foreign writers. The editorial professionals interviewed by Sapiro also cited the cost of translation as a factor that discouraged publishers, as well as the negative reception of translated titles at large chain bookstores which often choose to “skip” a book, accepting zero copies, if a translator’s name appears on the cover. Sapiro concludes that in France the smaller upmarket publishing houses publish translations from a much broader range of languages. Sapiro believes this is done in order to resist the homogenizing influence of English on the French book market. Something similar was found in the U.S. where smaller publishers were far more likely to publish works in translation, possibly as a way to set themselves apart from the large publishing conglomerates. Some of the editors that Sapiro interviewed stated that they wished to combat what they saw as the closing off of U.S. culture due to the drop in publication of works in translation.

## World Literature and Translation

Some thirty years after the declaration of Translation Studies as an independent and legitimate discipline, Susan Bassnet calls for translation theorists to look beyond the field of Translation Studies in order to better understand the political and ethical implications of translation today. Bassnet maintains that now more than ever, Translation Studies should include new movements such as world literature with its broad range of discourses.

*I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language – Virgil was long read in Latin in Europe. In its most expansive sense, world literature could include any work that has ever reached beyond its home base (...) a work only has an effective life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture (Damrosch, 2003:4).*

The concept of world literature has been around for a long time, with Goethe stating in 1827 that “National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of World Literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach” (Goethe in Damrosch, 2003: 1). Gisele Sapiro notes a growing trend in literature towards a more global outlook, thanks to the greater connectedness of our world. “The multiplication, since the 1980s, of specific organizations like the international book fairs, from Peking to Guadalajara through New Delhi and Ouagadougou, is altogether the symptom and one of the mechanisms of this unification” (Sapiro, 2010). The growing number of publishing houses dedicated to promoting international literature in English serves as further evidence of this literary trend. Founded in 1915, Alfred A. Knopf was the main publisher of translations for most of the last century.

*The very first book that Alfred Knopf published was a translation of a 19th-century French playwright. When I asked Alfred, who'd retired when I started but would come into the offices regularly, he looked at me and said simply: anti-Semitism. He was child of Berlin Jews who'd immigrated to America. American authors didn't want to be published by a Jewish publisher. Alfred and Blanche, his wife and a publisher in her own right, turned to Europe, and that's how from the beginning we made it through to international literature (Janeway in Aydt, 2014).*

Knopf continues to publish translations but is no longer an independent press; it has been absorbed into one of the “Big Five” publishing conglomerates that dominate the U.S. publishing industry. The vast majority of the books published in translation annually in the U.S., around 80%, are put out by small, independent publishing houses. Some of these publishers have been around for many years, such as New Directions, founded in 1936, Godine, 1970, White Pine Press in 1973, Dalkey Archive Press in 1984, The New Press, 1992, Seven Stories Press, 1995, and Other Press, 1998. Since the start of the new millennium, and especially in the past few years, there has been a surge of independent publishers dedicated to literature in translation. Melville House was founded in 2001, Archipelago Books, 2003, Open Letter Books, 2008, And Other Stories, 2009, Berlinica, 2010, Pushkin, 2012, Ox and Pigeon, 2012, New Vessel Press, 2012, Restless Books, 2013, Unnamed Press, 2013, Readux Books, 2013, and Deep Vellum, 2014. Many of these small publishing houses are non-profit organizations or linked to a major university which allows them to stay afloat despite the fact that publishing translations is not extremely lucrative. The “About” sections on the websites of these publishers use the words “passion,” “dedicated,” “mission,” “change,” “different,” “unique” and “new voices,” terms that offer a stark contrast to the image projected by mainstream English language publishers.

Many of the newer independent publishers are also experimenting with publishing translations in digital format. Lucas Lyndes, co-founder of Ox and Pigeon Ebooks spoke to

*Publishing Perspectives* about the implications that digital publishing has for translated literature.

*Can a small publisher afford to take a risk on this unknown but talented Argentine writer? Can people in other Spanish-speaking countries get their hands on this book? Can a translator get permission to translate it? Can she find a publisher willing to put that translation out? Can that translation find its audience in English-speaking countries? Are there enough readers to ensure that the publisher won't go broke bringing out this labor of love? The answer to all of these questions is infinitely more likely to be "yes" now, thanks to ebooks (Lyndes, 2013).*

The digital revolution in publishing undoubtedly facilitates the translation of literature. Since e-books are able to completely bypass the costs of printing and distribution, the financial risk to the publisher is reduced dramatically. The digital model allows a book to be released in translation quickly and if an e-book is extremely successful it can later be released in print with the publisher's assurance that there is an interested readership ready to accept the translation. There is still a limited awareness in translated literature on the part of mainstream English speaking readers but this may be changing as digital publication gains a stronger foothold in the book market. As Ben Rosenthal states,

*It is of lasting importance to expose American readers to the breadth of wonderful literature that exists around the world, especially to younger readers. Novels from other countries bring valuable cultural diversity to young American readers. Other issues remain in bringing translations to the US market, but creative financial models could help the trickle turn into a steady stream (Rosenthal, 2013).*

Rajini Srikanth describes the reader of world literature as being motivated by a desire to experience another culture as "a collectible keepsake and reminder of one's encounter with the unfamiliar that can be added to the halls of one's cosmopolitan consciousness" (Srikanth, 2010). Srikanth analyzed the online publication *Words Without Borders* and was impressed by the digital magazine's editorial team who seemed to be "reflective and self-interrogating agents of cultural exchange who facilitate the widening of knowledge and perspective of English-speaking readers" (Srikanth, 2010). Srikanth

questions the publication's decision to present their material in a purely digital format, arguing that the rapid pace of online consumption runs counter to their objective of "allaying ignorance, stimulating curiosity, and opening the minds of readers" (Srikanth, 2010). However, it could be argued that the digital format is far more practical for a world literature publication as it allows contact with a much broader audience than traditional print publication. English serves as the lingua franca for readers across languages who are interested in international literature. Since the audience of a magazine such as *Words Without Borders* is not specific to one nation or region, the digital editions are never more than a click away from any prospective reader no matter where they live. The online format also fits the lifestyle of many readers, especially younger generations, who are increasingly likely to consume all of their cultural content via internet, from news to television series, movies and books. Especially important for a site that promotes literature in translation, the fact that there are no printing costs means the original version of a translated work can be published alongside the translation. The Digital Age holds many possibilities for translation as individuals with shared interests unite in virtual communities, uninhibited by national borders. Beyond a reaction to the threat of a homogenized global culture, or as a response to the lack of diversity in the U.S. publishing landscape, I believe that the recent proliferation of publishing houses and literary journals dedicated to translation are emblematic of the fact that English language readers today are more interested in foreign cultures and thus more accepting of translated literature.

## Cultural Markers and Translation

The translator often encounters cultural elements in a source text that prove difficult to express in the target language. They are then faced with an important decision. They could choose to respect the cultural and linguistic identity of the original, which may mean the target reader has to make inferences; or they may make the source text conform to the limits of the target language, thereby erasing the traces of the source culture. André Lefevere (1990:19) states that translation is “a matter of the relative weight two cultures carry in the mind of the translator.” David Bellos echoes this concept as he describes the difference between translating up, to a language that is perceived as more prestigious, and translating down, to a less prestigious language. “Up translations,” to a more prestigious target language, will probably retain little or no trace of the text’s source language and culture. Cultures that hold a peripheral place in the global literary polysystem on the other hand, seek access to the center and thereby value the foreign. Bellos states that “translating down from a dominant to a vernacular language is typically accompanied by substantial imports of vocabulary and syntactic constructions from the source” (Bellos, 2011). Translations from a dominant to a subordinate language will allow for signs of the source to show through in translation since the foreignness carries with it an element of prestige. In languages that lie near the center, foreignness will be undesirable and translated literature will have difficulty entering into the polysystem. “But as there is only one central language at the moment, the gulf in translation practice lies between English and the rest” (Bellos, 2011). Especially in translation to English, the literary translator should be aware of his or her role in the circulation of aesthetic and intellectual values in which they will inevitably play a part.

What constitutes a cultural marker varies depending on the relationship between the two cultures which are brought into contact through the process of translation. Herrero speaks of the increasing influence of English in Spanish-speaking culture. “Imperceptibly at first, in great strides now, Anglo-Saxon culture introduces itself into our system and we increasingly accept and reproduce behaviors that are culturally quite distant” (Herrero, 1999, translation is my own). Similarly, Heim states

*we may also find that our authors ‘help’ us more than they used to: the passage of the Ishiguro novel I cited above is indicative of a tendency on the part of many contemporary authors to write with an eye on the world audience and consequently do some of the explaining of cultural and historical concepts for us. Be that as it may, they will never do the whole job (Heim, 2008).*

Between any two languages there will be many terms that do not have exact equivalents. These are the terms that are often referred to as “untranslatable.” The fluency model of translation facilitates the translator's work as it justifies neutralizing or omitting any terms that prove tricky, in the name of creating a natural-sounding text as their duty to the target reader. A foreignizing approach to translation may prefer to borrow a term from the source language, much in the way that cultures often borrow words from other languages when an appropriate equivalent is lacking.

In her 1999 doctoral thesis on cultural markers in postcolonial literature, Leticia Herrero defines cultural markers as elements which lack an equivalent in the target culture, making them extremely difficult to translate. Similarly, Christiane Nord states that “translation problems are a result of the difference in culture-specific habits, expectations, norms and conventions concerning verbal and other behavior, such as text-type conventions, general norms of style, norms of measuring, formal conventions of marking

certain elements in a text” (Nord 1992:46 in Herrero 1999). Kate James, in her 2001 paper on the translation of cultural elements, states that “the cultural implications for translation may take several forms, ranging from lexical content and syntax to ideologies and ways of life in a given culture” (James, 2001).

Cultural markers are often deemed untranslatable because they refer to notions and concepts that do not exist outside the language which gives them their name. The translator’s challenge is to find the best way to communicate these elements while minimizing loss and maximizing understanding. Terms for food, clothing, proper names, nicknames, institutions, and slang are generally considered cultural markers. Stylistic norms for the organization of textual structures stem from the literary conventions of a linguistic community and often do not coincide with what is considered good writing in another language. Translator Susan Jill Levine, in her book *The Subversive Scribe* speaks of her experience as a translator of Spanish to English and describes the difficulties posed by the stylistic differences between the two languages. She recounts the way in which the stylistics of Spanish and English diverged in the late 1600s when The Royal Society of the English language officially rejected Baroque extravagance in favor of the more direct, natural language of merchants and artisans. The Spanish Royal Academy on the other hand continued to proudly promote Baroque aesthetics in Spanish literature. For the purpose of this study I propose that the stylistic and structural elements of a language also provide an opportunity for the translator to let the source text show through in translation and therefore constitute cultural markers as well.



Many theorists have proposed their own set of processes for the translation of cultural markers, each from a different perspective. This diversity in theories causes terminological confusion with some authors using the same term to describe very different techniques and at other times using different terms to describe what is functionally the same process. My analysis of the translations in this study is based primarily on Herrero's classification system. This list is not meant to be a prescriptive model of how the translator should deal with cultural markers but a rather a compilation of the possible resources that translators may draw from.

In his 2011 book detailing the history of translation, *Is that a Fish in Your Ear?*, David Bellos denounces the common practice among book critics to praise the “naturalness” of a translation. But Bellos also recognizes that allowing too much of the source language to show through in a translation often leads to a text that is difficult to read and will expose the translator to harsh criticism. Echoing Heim, Bellos seems to favor a moderate form of foreignization, what he explains as the transmission of a sense of foreignness in a novel, achieved through the use of foreign words left in the text, especially titles, greetings and interjections, which can easily be deduced by the TL reader through context. Bellos believes that this method “provides readers with something they might well want to glean from reading a translated work: the vague impression of having read a novel in (another language)” (Bellos, 2011). He points out however that what he calls “selective” or “decorative” foreignization is only possible when two languages have had extensive contact.

Michael Henry Heim rejects foreignization techniques but instead proposes “that we capitalize on the foreign elements already in the text” (Heim, 2008). He suggests using foreign words that have already been incorporated into English as loan words and are therefore easily understood by the English-speaking reader. He points to the example of the Russian word *samovars* as well as the German *Herr*, the French *Monsieur*, and the Japanese *san*. He additionally proposes non-translation of proper nouns as well as geographic concepts, including city and street names. Non-translation allows for the maximum degree of foreignization of the target text. Some theorists argue that non-translation should not be considered as a translation technique since no actual translation takes place. However, even words left in their original form will be pronounced and perceived differently by the target reader, thus undergoing a transformation. Non-translation is not simply transcribing; it represents a conscious decision by the translator and therefore constitutes a translated segment of text. Some theorists prefer to call this technique repetition or transference, possibly to avoid the sticky issue of whether non-translation can be considered a translation technique. I prefer the term non-translation because I believe it to be the most descriptive name for this technique. The use of non-translation has been called “a confession of impotence” (García Yebra 1982:336 in Herrero, 1999), but it could also be understood as an overt attempt on the part of the translator to respect the culture from which the text originated.

Borrowing takes place when a word from one language is adopted by another language and made to fit the rules of the adopted language’s spelling or grammar. Herrero gives the example of “football” translated to Spanish as “fútbol.” Bellos subscribes to the idea that borrowing is quite relevant to translation since borrowed elements are “fundamental facts of intercultural communication – and that is the very field of

translation” (Bellos, 2011). Non-translation and borrowing are considered to be the best techniques for the translation of cultural elements when the target reader will not have difficulty in understanding the original concept.

Literal translation, or calque, employs the officially-accepted translation of a term. Herrero’s example is “football” translated to Spanish as “balón de pie.” A literal translation should be easily understood by the target culture unless their language lacks the underlying idea. Literal translation may include spelling calques, such as the absence of the first exclamation point in a Spanish text, or syntactic calques, as when the translation maintains the structure of the source language. The example Herrero gives of a syntactic calque is “all you need” translated as “todo lo que necesitas,” instead of the more natural “lo único que necesitas.” Herrero’s example of a semantic calque is “términos de uso” instead of the more natural term “condiciones de uso.”

“If the term is transparent or is explained in the context, it may be used alone, otherwise transcription is followed by an explanation or a translator's note” (Durdurneau, 2011). A gloss allows the translator to recover cultural information that may have been lost in translation. Here the translator acts as a guide for the reader, helping them navigate the rough waters of the source culture. An intratextual gloss takes place through overt explanation within the body of the text and may be done with very few added words, in such a way that it reads like part of the original. An extratextual gloss may appear in brackets, footnotes, or explained in a translator’s introduction. Some prefer extratextual gloss over the intratextual gloss which is often perceived as the original author’s own words. Others, such as Heim, choose to skip the translator’s preface and footnotes “because

I find they distract the reader's attention from the work itself and the pure, aesthetic pleasure of reading (...) they can make even a bestseller read like a textbook" (Heim, 2008). Instead, Heim favors intratextual gloss which allows recovery of lost information by weaving it into the text subtly, in a way that does not seem like an explanation. Venuti states that the foreignization of a translated text often derives in "excessive gain" and Bellos sees foreignness in a translation as "necessarily an addition to the original." Gloss constitutes gain since it involves the addition of information that was not necessary for the source language reader.

Another instance of gain in translation is autonomous creation which introduces new information into a translated text where it did not exist in the original. This may be done in order to make the text clearer to the target readership, or to conserve elements of a text such as tone, style, rhythm, sound, or rhyme, common in translation of poetry. Techniques such as gloss and autonomous creation introduce details to the translation that are not present in the source text. This "gain," however, allows the translator to express information that would otherwise be lost through the process of translation.

Through "neutralization" the significance of a cultural marker is not erased entirely but simply replaced by a term or concept that will be more familiar to the target culture. Partial neutralization strips a cultural marker of local characteristics which may be opaque to a foreign reader. The example that Herrero gives is "five grand" to "cinco mil dólares." Leaving the sum in dollars, the original currency reflects the source culture but the neutralization of the colloquial term "grand" makes the sum easier for the target reader to understand. This technique allows the cultural marker to maintain its identity at the same

time that it is assimilated into the target culture. A total neutralization on the other hand would strip a term of any information from the source culture and replace it with a term that has no cultural weight in the TL, for example, “five grand” to “mucho dinero.” Total neutralization is often reduced to a description or explanation of the most important attributes of the cultural marker without the addition of any other information to compensate for the lost cultural information.

Omission of a cultural marker is often attributed to lack of understanding on the part of the translator. However, a term may be omitted by the translator for any number of reasons if the term lacks any meaning for the target reader and is therefore deemed irrelevant to the translation. Naturalization involves a complete substitution of a source term for a term belonging entirely to the target culture. Herrero’s example is “one dollar” translated as “ciento cincuenta pesetas.” This method should be used consistently or not at all because the presence of a cultural marker that is strongly tied to the target language could constitute a sharp break in the tone of a translated text and thus prove jarring to the reader.

Cultural markers are treated almost exclusively as items that could potentially pose a challenge to the translator but I would like to propose that for the translator interested in maintaining source elements in translation, cultural markers also pose a great opportunity. As will be shown in the Corpus Analysis section, source-oriented translation often implies the addition of elements not present in the source text and the selection of atypical terms and structures that emphasize the foreignness of the text.

## METHODOLOGY

### Objectives

While an asymmetrical relation undoubtedly exists between the influence of English on other languages and the influence of other languages on English, I believe that U.S. society is more open and accepting of foreign cultures now than ever before. This is especially true in the case of Spanish. Thanks to the large population of Latinos in the United States, English speaking readers are increasingly likely to understand Spanish cultural markers. This means that the translator of this language pair may be able to respect the source culture without obscuring meaning for target readers. The present study aims to uncover the ways in which cultural elements of Spanish language literary texts are rendered in translations to English. I will focus on short works of fiction from the Spanish, published in the last three years by digital magazines which share the objective of promoting international literature. Interviews with translators about their ideology can provide insight into what the translator perceives as their duty to either communicate elements of the source culture or produce a fluent text for the target reader. However, in order to determine what translators actually do in practice, the posterior analysis of their work is the best way to determine where their practice actually lies between the two poles. The present study will analyze a bilingual corpus of nine translations in comparison with their corresponding source texts. The purpose of the analysis is to draw conclusions as to whether the translators tended towards a foreignization or a domesticization of the original text, based on the techniques reviewed in the previous section.

I have chosen to select my corpus from three online journals, two of which, *Words Without Borders* and *Asymptote*, are dedicated to publishing literature from a variety of languages in translation to English. The third, *Palabras Errantes*, publishes Latin American Spanish language texts in translation to English. In order to analyze both the source text and the original, I have limited my corpus to texts that were originally written in Spanish. From each of these journals I have chosen three short stories to be analyzed based on the extent to which the translations seemed to favor either the source or target culture. My aim is to determine whether the fluency model of translation is still the norm, even among newer, digital publications that are devoted to diversity and which embrace the Digital Age. As proposed by many researchers, (Baker 1995, Hartman 1980 and Leech 1991) the descriptive analysis of a bilingual corpus allows for immediate results on the translation process. From each of the three digital journals, three translations and their original Spanish texts will be analyzed. My corpus is therefore made up of eighteen texts in total. My analysis will attempt to detect any choices that the translator has made, whether consciously or unconsciously, that contributed to the either the domesticization of the translated work, or the maintenance of the source culture.

## Hypothesis

In her study on globalization and the book industry in France and the United States, Gisele Sapiro found that large-scale publishing houses which put out books for mass audiences seem to place sales numbers above any other factor when deciding which titles or authors to publish. Sapiro also found that translations from foreign languages are increasing in the United States among smaller, upmarket publishing houses. Sapiro believes this is

occurring “as a means to combat the growing hegemony of English in the world and the closure of American culture as revealed by the dramatic fall of the share of translations in the American book production” (Sapiro, 2010). This study aims to build on the work done by Sapiro and others in order to examine the practices carried out by contemporary translators and editors.

I hypothesize that today, in the context of increased contact among cultures, translated literature may be slowly growing in status among an English-speaking readership. I believe that translators and editors may increasingly be able to answer Lawrence Venuti’s call to retain cultural elements in translation, especially in translations from Spanish. The three digital literary magazines from which I have gathered the corpus for this study share a common mission of promoting world literature. I chose to select my corpus from these journals because I suspected that if the fluency model of literary translation were on its way out, we would surely see this trend reflected in one of these young publications which are committed to advancing diversity in English language literature. I hypothesize that these three publications will be respectful of the source culture in the translated texts that they commission, edit and publish. I predict that an extremely fluent translation, which shows no traces of the target language or culture, will not be the norm across the texts studied, even if the fluency model still dominates in the publishing industry as a whole.



## Description of Corpus

The treatment of cultural markers in translation has varied throughout the history of translation as trends in society have favored foreign or domestic ideals, tied to a vast array of conditions that depend on a given social context. There are many interesting studies that recount these flows in translation norms throughout history. This study however aims to focus not on the past, but on the present state of translation with respect to cultural elements. With this in mind, the corpus that will be analyzed is limited to short stories which were published online in the past three years. All three magazines share a similar mission of promoting world literature as resistance to the homogenizing forces imposed on the global publishing industry by the English language. All three journals include the original text alongside its translation to English, either often or always, making a bilingual corpus readily accessible. My analysis focuses only on works originally written in Spanish, so that I would be able to compare the translation to the original text and evaluate the techniques employed by the translator in an attempt to detect tendencies towards either fluency or foreignization,

*Words Without Borders* was founded in 2003 by Alane Mason, a book editor and translator, whose main objective in starting the digital journal was to broaden the horizons of the average English language reader and enable them to discover the vast and varied literary world beyond the borders of their language. The “About” section on the *Words Without Borders* webpage sites their mission as the promotion of

*cultural understanding through the translation, publication, and promotion of the finest contemporary international literature. Our publications and programs open doors for readers of English around the world to the multiplicity of viewpoints, richness of experience, and literary perspective on world events offered by writers*

*in other languages. We seek to connect international writers to the general public, to students and educators, and to print and other media and to serve as a primary online location for a global literary conversation” (Words Without Borders webpage, accessed 28/1/14).*

*Words Without Borders* is a monthly publication and cites having published “well over 1,600 pieces from 119 countries and 92 languages” (*Words Without Borders* webpage, accessed 28/1/14). The journal also seeks to promote world literature among students through an educational program that provides teachers with content and resources so that they may teach international literature in their classrooms. *Words Without Borders* also has partnerships with traditional publishing houses to periodically release print anthologies, five to date.

*Words Without Borders* is the oldest and most established of the three magazines from which I have gathered my corpus and their success has probably served as a model for similar publications. Each issue of *Words Without Borders* revolves around a specific theme. Past issues have centered on “Kurdish Literature,” January 2014, “Writing from the Oulipo,” December 2013, and “African Women, Indigenous Languages,” October, 2013. The monthly issue can be read online for free in its entirety. The January 2014 issue included three works of Kurdish fiction, five words of Kurdish poetry, a piece of non-fiction translated from Kurdish, and an interview. The issue also included a work of Japanese fiction, a Polish literary reportage with three works of non-fiction translated from Polish, and a book review. Of the fifteen pieces published in the January 2014 issue, two pieces were original to English and the remaining thirteen were translations from other languages. Only one text included the original alongside it in what the magazine calls a bilingual version. Each piece is followed by a biography of both the writer and translator.

*Asymptote* was founded in 2011 by Singapore native Yew Leong Lee. He studied creative writing at prestigious U.S. universities but after graduation he found it difficult to get his work published. Lee's sense that many publishing houses in the U.S. seemed unwilling to publish works by foreign authors, even those who wrote in English, inspired him to start a journal dedicated to world literature. His mission was to provide a place for English language readers to discover world literature. The name *Asymptote* illustrates the journal's view on translation as a creative act, stating in the "About" section:

*We are interested in encounters between languages and the consequences of these encounters. Though a translation may never fully replicate the original in effect (thus our name, "asymptote": the dotted line on a graph that a mathematical function may tend towards but never reach), it is in itself an act of creation (...) The value of translation is that it unleashes from latency ideas and emotions to a vast sea of others who do not have access to the language in which these ideas and emotions reside (Asymptote webpage, accessed 28/1/14).*

*Asymptote* publishes quarterly issues, in January, April, July, and October of each year. A typical issue of *Asymptote* contains between four and seven fiction entries, the work of up to ten poets, two or three pieces of literary criticism, two interviews, four works of drama, three to four pieces of non-fiction, two articles on visual arts, and a special feature focused on a specific theme. Of the forty total entries in the January 2014 issue, thirty-four pieces were translated to English from another language, and most of the non-translated pieces were created by the journal's editorial staff specifically for the issue. *Asymptote* strives to include a broad spectrum of languages in each issue. The January 2014 issue published works translated from Catalan, German, Finnish, Spanish, Slovak, Afrikaans, Japanese, Farsi, French, Chinese, Italian, Lithuanian, Russian, Norwegian, Hungarian, Portuguese, Serbian, Korean, and Arabic. Each translated piece includes a biography of the author and translator. A link to read the piece in its original language is made clearly

available and whenever possible the option to listen to the story read in its original language by its original author is offered. Each issue of *Asymptote* is accessible in its entirety through the journal's website, free of charge. *Asymptote* also has a blog which uploads original articles, translations, and interviews on a daily basis. *Asymptote* holds annual events to raise awareness for world literature and in January 2014 they announced the winners of their first translation contest which awarded USD\$1,000 in prize money to a translator and included prestigious judges such as Lawrence Venuti.

*Palabras Errantes* is an online journal dedicated exclusively to Latin American literature in translation. The journal was started in 2011 by translation students at Cambridge University with the mission of

*forging a dialogue between Latin American writers and Anglophone readers interested in getting beyond Borges and Bolaño. To this end, we publish writers who thus far have had little or no exposure in Anglophone literary circles, while serving as a forum for translators interested in Latin American literature (Palabras Errantes webpage, accessed 28/1/14).*

*Palabras Errantes* is not divided into sections, which makes the journal's contents harder to search but it appears that the issues contain mostly fiction and occasionally poetry. Since *Palabras Errantes* aims to show the diversity of Latin American literature, each issue is dedicated to a specific genre or region. Past issues have focused on Mexican speculative fiction, Argentine narrative, and Uruguayan women writers. Each issue provides an in-depth look at the particular genre being presented and therefore many pieces from the running theme are uploaded over a period of several months, often including more than one piece by each writer profiled. Every piece is translated to English from Spanish and the

original text is published in conjunction with the translation, along with a biography of the author.

I have worked personally with two of these journals, as a translator for *Palabras Errantes*, and as member of the editorial team for *Asymptote*. *Palabras Errantes* commissions all of the texts it publishes as the editors actively seek out lesser known writers from Latin America. *Asymptote* accepts submissions both from its extensive editorial team as well as authors and literary translators but greater consideration is given to high-profile authors that may help draw attention to a particular issue. *Words Without Borders* does not openly accept submissions that do not fit the theme of an edition. This leads me to believe that the non-themed pieces in each issue probably come by way of agents, publishers, or other contacts that well-known foreign writers may have. All three of the digital journals from which my corpus was drawn could be said to have a foreignizing agenda since they share the goal of exposing English language readers to writing that breaks from the norm of what is typically seen in literature in translation to English.

## CORPUS ANALYSIS

### ANALYSIS OF TEXTS 1 AND 2

TEXT 1: “Arena blanca, piedra negra” by Eduardo Halfon

TEXT 2: “White Sand, Black Stone” by Eduardo Halfon, translated by Daniel Hahn

Published in *Words Without Borders*, November 2013

This story tells of a writer's failed attempt to cross the border between Guatemala and Belize. He is initially held up by an expired passport and later realizes he cannot continue his journey because of a dead car battery. Translator Daniel Hahn's work appears to have been guided by a respect for the original and a desire to express the source culture in his translation. Many cultural markers in this short story are maintained, often through non-translation of terms such as "señor," "ranchera," "queso fresco," "loroco," "mi rey," "compañeros," "aguardiente," "Don," and "carnitas." In the same sentence in which "queso fresco" and "loroco" are left untranslated, "naranja agria con pepitoria" becomes "sour oranges with pumpkin seed." Possibly, the translator thought these food items would be more readily understood by the target readers and therefore worth translating. The translation shows clear signs of influence from Spanish in the form of literal translation and calques. Hahn breaks up some of author Eduardo Halfon's sentences, but longer Spanish sentences are not always broken into shorter sentences in English, as might be expected since English favors brevity and conciseness. Hahn sometimes makes use of semicolons to join two separate sentences from the original, making them longer.

Hahn often favors a literal translation that produces the effect of foreignness through the use of atypical terms. For example, "His woman, I presumed. Or one of his women." The use of the term "woman" over "wife" or "girlfriend" is quite uncommon in English and evokes connotations of machismo. The protagonist notices someone "taking advantage" of the shade. This phrase sounds unusual in English as the more natural expression would be "enjoying the shade." Similarly, "echar gasolina" is translated literally as "to put in gasoline," a less than fluent way of saying "to fill up on gas." The Spanish original also shines through in translation when the officer asks for the protagonist's "place of residence" instead of the more common term, "address," and "curtain of beads" belies

the Spanish possessive structure which was chosen over the more typical English construction “beaded curtain.”

This translation is characterized by gain. Many details, which sometimes appear to have been added quite arbitrarily, appear throughout the English text where they were absent in the Spanish original. In some cases the motives behind the gain are unclear as it does not seem to fill in any missing cultural information. The phrase “mi abuelo siempre entendió, acaso a un nivel intuitivo, que una historia es en realidad muchas historias,” becomes “my grandfather understood, maybe at an intuitive level, that a story grows, changes its skin, does acrobatics on the tightrope of time; he understood that a story is really many stories.” Similarly, “Then I looked at my friend’s sapphire-colored Saab: open and weary and with its innards exposed” appears in the translation where no equivalent sentence exists in the original. Where the original states merely “Ciudad de Guatemala, le mentí,” the translation goes further, stating “Guatemala City, I lied, although it wasn’t altogether a lie.” “Donde había dejado aparcado el carro” becomes “where I had left the car: an old sapphire-colored Saab that a friend used to lend me, for traveling around the country.” Another instance of gain can be found in the translation of “Y yo de inmediato, al verlo acercarse y sonreírme con sus dientes de plata, sentí una ráfaga de desconfianza y temor.” The English translation of this sentence includes additional information explaining the narrator’s affective state: “And immediately, as I saw him approach and smile at me with his silver teeth, I felt a flash of mistrust and panic and I was about to shut my eyes and tell him please, just take the money, let me keep my credit cards and the rest of my papers.”

In other instances it seems that Hahn chose to add in extra details in order to help set the scene. The translation includes a description of the restaurant's lighting, stating "A couple of white light bulbs hung from the ceiling," although no such information at all is given in the original. Small details that help recreate the atmosphere of the location appear in the translation but were not present in the original, such as in "Salí casi corriendo a la calle principal" which becomes "I went off, almost at a run, into the gloom of the main road." A description of the restaurant's tablecloths is added to the following sentence "Sobre cada una de las cuatro mesas había una botella de plástico con atomizador," translated to "On each of the four tables, on a floral plastic tablecloth, there was a bottle with an atomizer."

Sometimes Hahn seems to add factual details that were not provided in the original, possibly because he feels that the target language reader will desire more specific information. "El campo de concentración nazi" becomes "the Sachsenhausen concentration camp;" "Le gustaba decirnos que en Nueva York había pagado por él cuarenta dólares," becomes "In New York, at a Jewish jeweler's in Harlem, he had paid forty dollars for it." In some cases the additional information given seems to be an attempt to paint a clearer picture of the action taking place. "Tras cobrarme se sentó a mi lado," is depicted with greater detail in "After weighing them and taking my money, he sat down beside me." "Aún no puedo ver un mapa del país sin pensar que Guatemala quedó decapitada," undergoes a gain in the translation as "I still can't see a map of the country without thinking that Guatemala, in a more than figurative sense, had been decapitated." The fact that Hahn clarified the phrase by adding "in a more figurative sense" suggests that he felt the reader would be confused by the sentence and therefore felt an explanation was in order.



Hahn's divergences from the original sometimes shift the meaning of a sentence. "Aún no puedo ver un mapa del país sin antojárseme un mango verde," is translated as "I still can't see a map of the country without thinking of a green mango." The fact that the protagonist wishes for the green mango is lost in the translation of "antojárseme" as "thinking of." I would argue that this is a significant detail. As an English speaking reader from the U.S., lacking much knowledge of the culinary customs of Central America, a green mango seemed like a very odd reward to me. The translated sentence made me wonder whether the narrator felt surprise at having drawn the best map in the school, or if he was surprised at having received a green mango as a prize. This sentence in the original clarified that a green mango was a desirable object and therefore an appropriate award for drawing the best map in the school. The translation of "antojárseme un mango verde" into "thinking of a green mango" effectively neutralizes this cultural information.

Although this translation shows a great deal of gain, some details from the source were also omitted. The phrase "No tenía ningún valor económico" is omitted in translation, possibly in an attempt to avoid redundancy since this information can be inferred from the sentence that follows, "It was just any old black stone, in any old gold setting." While the translation is in general more descriptive, a detail concerning the officer's appearance is lost in the translation of "Traénos dos cervezas, hija, gritó el oficial bigotudo." to "Bring us two beers, kid, called the immigration officer." Hahn probably chose to omit the description of the guard's facial hair because the equivalent adjective "mustachioed" in English would produce an antiquated effect.

Overall this translation seems to have prioritized a respect for the source text. Hahn's inclusion of numerous source terms and the addition of information that helped paint a vivid picture of the story's setting and action show a foreignizing agenda on the part of the translator. This translation allows the English reader to enter into the cultural context of the original work without sacrificing readability. Hahn was given a wealth of cultural markers to work with in this story and he did an excellent job of conveying them in his beautifully-translated version of the story.

#### ANALYSIS OF TEXTS 3 AND 4

TEXT 3: "Confesión" by Care Santos

TEXT 4: "Confession" by Care Santos, translated by Megan Berkobien

Published in *Words Without Borders*, December 2012

This short story is written as a firsthand confession of the murder of a journalist, committed by the writer he was interviewing. It is a lighthearted and funny story with very few cultural markers. Without the explicit details that let the reader know this story is set in Spain, there is very little "Spanishness" to the text. I read the translation before reading the original and I initially thought that the text had been domesticized in translation since there were so few remnants of the source culture. Upon closer analysis however, I realized that the translation was characterized by a close respect for the original both semantically and syntactically. The sentence as unit, as well as exact punctuation such as comma placement and use of colon was reproduced very closely throughout the translated piece. Influences of Spanish stylistics are seen in the translation as Berkobien chooses to begin sentences with conjunctions, although this is normally discouraged in English stylistics. However, short paragraphs, one sentence in length in the Spanish original, were moved into one of the

adjacent paragraphs for the English version which shows an accommodation to English stylistic norms.

Berkobien chooses not to translate proper names and uses a variety of techniques to express the foreign names in her English translation. In one instance the name of a Spanish bookstore is placed in italics and the Spanish article is used: “I entered *la librería Cervantes*.” In contrast, the English definite article is used for two hotel names, “the Gran Hotel Regente” and “the Gran Hotel España” and these names are not placed in italics. The title of the Spanish newspaper, “*La Nueva España*” is italicized but as this is the title of a publication it would be italicized anyway under English stylistic guidelines. Non-translation is employed when the original refers to the sound of specific words: “Dos palabras que da gusto pronunciar. Como «pulpa», como «tántalo», como «plantígrado».” In English this sentence appears as: “Two words that are a pleasure to pronounce. Like *pul-pa*, like *tán-talo*, like *plantí-grado*.” Since the semantic meaning of these words is irrelevant, the English language reader does not lose any information in Berkobien’s non-translation of these terms. Here, the English-speaking reader comes into direct contact with the Spanish words that the narrator deems aesthetically pleasing. In addition, the hyphens between syllables aid the English reader in their attempt to pronounce the Spanish words. The target reader has the chance to experience what the source reader would upon encountering this sentence and pronouncing the words aloud to determine whether they agree with the narrator’s aesthetic judgement.

Spanish idiomatic expressions are substituted for English set phrases that convey the same general idea such as in the translation of “En fin, no quiero irme por las ramas,” to

“Anyway, I don’t want to beat around the bush;” “decanté por lo de toda la vida,” to “I opted for the old standby;” “En rigor a la verdad,” to “Strictly speaking;” and “el despojo de lo que fui” to “a shell of my former self.”

Literal translation is employed in several instances giving us a glimpse of the original Spanish constructions such as in the following translations which all sound less than fluent in English: “Aprovecho esta ocasión para agradecersele” to “I’d like to take advantage of this occasion to thank her for it;” “Era la pregunta que me había decidido por fin a lanzarme a su cuello, después de algunas vacilaciones” to “It was the question that had made me decide to throw myself at his neck, after vacillating some;” “es como un castigo divino” as “it’s like a divine punishment;” and “El caso es que” to “The case is that.” Berkobien shows respect for the original in her choice to maintain the second person plural form of the Spanish *vosotros* tense even though the English “you” functions equally for singular and plural: “Créeme que os compadezco” becomes “Believe me, I pity all of you” and “vosotros explicando siempre lo mismo” to “you all having to explain the same thing again and again.”

Some nuances of the original are not fully transmitted in translation which could be an indication of domesticizing choices on the part of the translator. For example “tálamo” which would mean “marriage bed” in English is translated simply as “bed;” “menguado” which in Spanish carries connotations of cowardliness or lack of integrity, is neutralized in its translation as “smallish,” which only connotes size in this context. Berkobien converted the journalist’s measurements into the English system which is clearly an attempt to make this information more readily understandable for the target audience.

This translation also shows evidence of omissions. “Mantuvimos una conversación distendida y agradable acerca de su maravillosa librería,” becomes simply and less descriptively “We had a conversation about the marvelous bookstore.” “Digamos que se llamaba M. M., por si a alguien le sirve de algo saberlo” is translated as “We’ll call him M.M.” It is unclear why the translator decided to leave out these small details when it appears that overall, she was focused on carefully respecting the source text. Also a mystery, as no translator’s note is included, is the reason behind the omission of several paragraphs from the translation which were present in the original version, also published in this edition of *Words Without Borders*.

This translation does not have an extensive amount of cultural markers which would have offered the translator more opportunities to give the reader a taste of the Spanish source text. The translator Megan Berkobien nevertheless appears to have actively sought out opportunities to preserve the tone and texture of the original work. Berkobien allowed the original language and culture to appear wherever possible instead of opting for a completely fluent and domesticized translation.

#### ANALYSIS OF TEXTS 5 AND 6

TEXT 5: “Limonos amargos” by César Antonio Molino

TEXT 6: “Bitter Lemons” by César Antonio Molino, translated by Francisco Macías

Published in *Words Without Borders*, March 2013

This story narrates the travels of a young university professor and two former students, only a few years his junior, who together depart from Spain on a road trip across

Europe. Their ultimate destination is mainland Greece but when they first stop at Corfu their motivation to continue traveling dissipates as they settle into a daily routine on the island. Since this story is not set in Spain, the content includes very few markers from the source culture. Macías seems to avoid breaking English stylistic norms. For example, he joins together phrases that would be considered incomplete sentences in English. Geographic markers are left untranslated in some cases, such as the “Rue de Rivoli” but translated in other cases, such as “Spinanada Square,” and “Mount Pantokrator.” “*La tortuga ecuestre*” is italicized and its translation is included in brackets afterwards, “[The Equestrian Turtle].”

Atypical terms are used throughout this translation, semantic calques from the Spanish original, such as “depilatory,” “firmament” and “ire.” These terms, if not totally unknown to most English-language readers will at least sound archaic or excessively poetic. Macías translates very literally at times which often results in constructions that sound less than fluent in English and belie the original Spanish syntax. For example in the sentence “some orchards reached down to the whitest sands,” reflects the Spanish “Algunos huertos bajaban a las arenas blanquísimas.” The atypical use of the term “requirement” will also sound odd to the target reader in the following sentence: “I understood immediately, based on their attire, that they were not Romans but Greeks; and this first requirement came to be confirmed by the slate blackboard where the following title was written in Italian.” This is a very literal translation from the Spanish: “Comprendí de inmediato, por la indumentaria, que no eran romanos, sino griegos, y este primer requerimiento me fue confirmando por la pizarra de la claqueta, donde figuraba escrito, en italiano, el título.”

In other cases a literal translation reads seamlessly in English. The Spanish sentence “Si no fuera porque había entablado alguna amistad entre los técnicos y aceptado el compromiso de echarles una mano, hubiera regresado a mi inquieto estado contemplativo, pues descubrí lo aburrido, lo lento y lo tedioso que es el realizar una película,” is translated literally but at the same time quite fluently as “Had I not developed a sort of friendship with the technicians and agreed to lend a helping hand, I would have returned to my restless and contemplative state, for I discovered how boring, slow, and tedious it is to make a film.”

After the narrator discovers an Italian film set on the island and becomes a volunteer member of the crew, many Italian words begin to appear in the Spanish original. Macías uses a variety of different tactics in his translation of these Italian terms. In some cases he translates an Italian word to English, thereby losing the foreign effect that the word has in the original, for example in the translation of “el *atrezzo* para rodajes de cine” as “props for a film shoot.” The genre of the film being shot, a “*péplum*” is left untranslated italicized in the English, but Macías adds an intratextual gloss to clarify the meaning of the term for the target reader, “it was a *peplum* [sword-and-sandal].” The Italian movie title, “*I rostri di Helena*” is similarly left untranslated but a clarification is included in brackets, “*I rostri di Helena* [The Rostra of Helen].”

This translation shows a very close recreation of the original meaning throughout the translation and is marked by frequent use of semantic calques that give the text a unique and foreign tone. Although translator Francisco Macías seems to have given less consideration to maintenance of the original Spanish syntax than the other two translations

selected from *Words Without Borders*, I believe that he was guided by a respect for the source text and a desire to produce a culturally authentic translation.

#### ANALYSIS OF TEXTS 7 AND 8

TEXT 7: “Guiando la Hiedra” by Hebe Uhart

TEXT 8: “Guiding the Ivy” by Hebe Uhart, translated by Maureen Shaughnessy

Published in *Asymptote*, January 2013

This story is told in the first person as the narrator reflects on her potted plants and her changing attitudes towards life. There are few clues to the setting of the text, except for the mention of the ill-mannered children of Buenos Aires. The text also includes a reference to the play *Las de Barranco* which will be easily recognized by an Argentine reader but not well known among the target readership, and is therefore explained in the translator’s note which accompanied this piece. Also in the translator’s note Shaughnessy indicates that the most challenging aspect of this translation was found in the author’s colloquial Argentine language.

Shaughnessy’s translation is not quite as literal as most of the other works analyzed in this study. Many of Uhart’s long sentences, punctuated by semicolons or colons, are broken into more than one sentence in translation and the paragraphs are arranged quite differently. In one case a new paragraph divides what was one sentence in the original version. Often, when a very literal translation for a term exists and would even sound natural in English, Shaughnessy opts for a synonym; possibly as an active attempt to distance her translation from the original and make it read more fluently in English. For example “facilita” becomes “makes easy,” even though “facilitates” is perfectly natural way



of stating the same idea in English and would fit more fluidly into the sentence. “Por eso otorgo escaso valor a mis pensamientos y decisiones” becomes the very fluent “That’s why I trivialize my thoughts and decisions.” With reference to one of the narrator’s favorite plants, she states “Ella está ahí.” Although English does not attribute gender to nouns as the Spanish does, it is nonetheless acceptable and even common to personify certain objects, especially living things such as plants. In her translation, Shaughnessy adheres strictly to English stylistic guidelines, and the personification of the plant, which is endearing and adds vibrancy to the text, is neutralized through the translation as “There it is.”

Shaughnessy employs literal translation in a few instances. Traces of the Spanish original can be seen in the choice of the phrase “it pleases me” over the more natural expression “I like it.” Similarly, the term “receptacles” is used instead of the more common term “pots,” a reflection of the original Spanish “recipientes.” In some cases a literal translation sounds unnatural to the point of resulting in a sentence with an opaque meaning, such as in “La vida de esa madre era un perpetuo aquelarre,” translated literally as “That woman’s life was a perpetual witches’ Sabbath.” The use of the auxiliary verb “should” with no subsequent main verb sounds less than fluent in the translated sentence “I have to distract myself from what I want and what I should.” This reflects the Spanish original, “debo distraerme de lo que quiero y lo que debo.” “Podría decir que tengo un ataque de sacar hojas muertas” is translated very literally in a sentence that sounds quite original in English: “You could say that I have a dead leaf-removing fit.”

This text contained several Argentine colloquialisms which were either neutralized or naturalized in the English version. “Chicos porteños” become “children in Buenos

Aires;” “al pedo,” is neutralized in its translation as “pointless.” The phrase “los respeto en seco” becomes “I respect them, period.” The Spanish expression “me voy entonando” which expresses the idea of being motivated to do something becomes in English simply “I wake up.” An original metaphor is neutralized as “solo dejé florecer un poquito de agua” becomes “I only allow a few tears to well up.” Idiomatic expressions are substituted for expressions with a similar function in English: “mataban así tres pájaros de un tiro” becomes to “kill three birds with one stone;” “para no gastar pólvora en chiman” is naturalized to “pick our battles wisely;” “para no dar por el pito más de lo que el pito vale, cuando en realidad un pito es algo muy difícil de evaluar” is substituted for “not go around flogging dead horses when a dead horse can't even take you for a ride.” Shaughnessy mentions her choice to substitute these Spanish expressions for set phrases in English in her translator’s note, where she provides a more literal translation of each idiom and additional explanation to aid the English reader’s understanding.

Shaughnessy chooses different translations for a given term based on the context in which it appears. Possibly, she was trying to exploit the broad range of nuance offered by one Spanish term, or perhaps she was simply following the tendency of English writing to avoid repetition. “Stature” is used as the translation of “frondosidad” where later on “verdure” is used in English for the same Spanish term. The idiomatic expression “tirar lastre” becomes “lightening my burden” in one instance and is later translated as “letting go.” The Spanish term “quiero” is translated once as “I love” and later in the same sentence as “I want.” The choice to use two different translations for this word eliminates the double meaning present in the Spanish sentence “antes mis pensamientos me enamoraban; yo quería lo que pensaba; ahora pienso lo que quiero.” This ambiguity is neutralized in the

English “My thoughts used to beguile me, I loved what I thought. Now I think what I want.”

In some cases a culturally neutral term is made more colloquial in the English translation. “Invadía” becomes the more colloquial and descriptive “She poked her nose into.” Shaughnessy’s translation is at times more descriptive than the original, showing gain in translation. For example the Spanish sentence “los pajaritos trabajan, van de acá para allá” is translated to the more descriptive “the little birds toil, they flit from here to there.”

This translation was faithful to the original text but seems to be on the more fluent end of the spectrum. In general, the source text was naturalized in its translation to English as the most commonly-accepted English syntactic structures were favored and the more natural terms or expressions were chosen over options that would have reflected the original language. While not blatantly domesticized, I believe that this translation shows signs of the translator’s desire for a fluent translation.

#### ANALYSIS OF TEXTS 9 AND 10

TEXT 9: “El viaje” by Melanie Taylor Herrera

TEXT 10: “The Voyage” by Melanie Taylor Herrera, translated by Christina Vega-Westhoff

Published in *Asymptote*, July 2013

This translation is characterized by a close respect for the source structure even when this results in a phrase which sounds unusual in English. The original punctuation, comma, colon, and semicolon placement was maintained almost exactly throughout the entire translation. This text featured many proper nouns and geographic markers, which

translator Vega-Westhoff dealt with in a variety of ways. All proper names were left untranslated and the original accentuation was maintained. Honorific titles were left untranslated but capitalized to reflect English stylistics as in “Don Juan Pérez de Guzmán,” and “Señor Terín.” Most nicknames were translated to English, such as “La Tuerta” as “One-Eye” and “María Piedad” as “María Pieta.” The Spanish “Una de ellas era María, la Flaca, para distinguirla así de otra criada, María, la Gorda,” is translated as “One of them was María, called Skinny María, to distinguish her from another maid, Fat María.” The nickname “la Caimana” is left untranslated but the article is removed. This nickname was possibly left untranslated because its origin is explained later in the story, thereby allowing the reader to infer the meaning of the name. “Santísimo” was translated once as “Most Holy” but a second time the term appeared untranslated in “Pray, pray, pray to the Santísimo because bad days are coming.” “La Inmaculada Concepción de María” is translated as “Immaculate Conception of María.” Place names were left untranslated throughout the story. “El puente del Rey” becomes “the El Rey bridge;” “Calle de la Empedrada” is transcribed exactly in the English translation; “Plaza Mayor” is also left untranslated instead of being substituted for “main square” or “town square,” maybe because “plaza” is a term that most English speakers will easily recognize.

Some gain is present in the use of intratextual gloss to explain certain culturally-bound terms which were left untranslated. “Indios flecheros” becomes “the *flecheros*, the Indian militiamen.” A similar technique was used for the term “cimarrones” which was left untranslated with a few words of explanation added: “Quizás podía unirse a los cimarrones,” becomes “Perhaps she could join the Cimarrons, the escaped slaves.” Later the same term, “cimarrones” is translated as “runaways.” The name for the Cimarron

settlement, “palenque,” is not explained in the Spanish but is described more explicitly in the English, perhaps because Vega-Westhoff felt the English speaking reader would be lost without a little more information. “La Caimana era una mujer fuerte y se sentía capaz de llegar al palenque” becomes in English “Caimana was a strong woman and she felt capable of arriving at the Cimarron settlement, the palenque.” Once the term has been explained, Vega-Westhoff does not add any additional description the following times that the word appears but does choose to add capitalization where the Spanish did not, “the people of the Palenque.”

The local foods named in the Spanish original are translated in a variety of ways, probably depending on the degree to which Vega-Westhoff believed her English-speaking readership would be able to understand each term. The Spanish words “pollo,” “ñame” and “grasa de cerdo” are respectively translated as “chicken,” “yam” and “pork fat;” “cilantro” is left untranslated while “yuca” undergoes a change to the accepted spelling in English, “yucca;” “otoe” is untranslated but italicized in the English version; “pedazos de maíz” become “pieces of maíz.”

Literal translation is used throughout the piece. For example “¿Hablará castellano?” is translated as “Does she speak Castilian?” The use of the term *Castilian* to indicate the Spanish language is noteworthy as it will be unfamiliar to most speakers of English but has significant connotations in the source language. The source structure is generally maintained, even when doing so derives in a less than fluent construction in English such as “a mother already dead” which shows signs of influence from the original, “una madre ya muerta.” A very literal translation reads quite naturally in English as in the sentence: “The

very day before her flight, she'd had to work miracles with the little that remained in the pantry to prepare a dinner for a very important señor.” This is a very close translation of the original “Solamente el día anterior a su fuga, había tenido que hacer milagros con lo poco que quedaba en la despensa para confeccionar una cena para un importante señor.”

In some instances Spanish colloquial expressions and metaphors are neutralized or naturalized. For example “va a poder dar la talla” loses its colloquial flavor in “he's going to be able to take them.” In other cases Spanish expressions are substituted for colloquial expressions in English: “lo que les espera” is “what's in store for them” and “Porque si la acaban de sacar del barco...” becomes “Because if she's fresh off the boat...”

This story was rich in culturally-bound terms and offered the translator many opportunities to choose between domesticizing or foreignizing translation techniques. Based on the previous analysis would appear that Vega-Westhoff rejected the fluency model in favor of a translation that closely represents the source culture and language of the original short story.

#### ANALYSIS OF TEXTS 11 AND 12

TEXT 11: “El cíclope” by Alejandro Zambra

TEXT: 12: “The Cyclops” by Alejandro Zambra, translated by Elizabeth Fisherkeller

Published in *Asymptote*, July, 2012

This story tells of a night spent between two friends exchanging memories and ideas. A first person narrator describes his friend Claudia, their outlooks on life, and their shared dream of becoming writers. The translation closely respects the punctuation of the

original piece and employs literal translation in several instances which derive in a less than fluent English version. Syntactic calques, for example, produce sentences with unusual word order in English: “protejo, por si acaso, su identidad, y la del novio” becomes “I protect, just in case, her identity, and that of the boyfriend;” “diez o veinte largos minutos” is translated as “ten or twenty long minutes” and “Nos echamos en el pasto a intercambiar disculpas como si compitiéramos, ahora, en un concurso de buenas maneras,” is translated to the slightly clumsy “We threw ourselves down on the grass to exchange apologies as if we were competing at it, now, in a good-manners competition.”

At times a very literal translation produces a change in meaning that could cause confusion for the reader. For example “A mí Cortázar no me gusta tanto, lancé de repente, becomes “I don't like Cortázar so much, I changed all of a sudden.” The translation of the verb “lancé” as “change” in English implies that the narrator had previously liked Cortázar and then altered his opinion. In the Spanish original the narrator is simply stating an opinion with no reference to having changed it. The Spanish term “pues” and the English term “then” could be equivalent in many contexts but it seems that the translator may lack knowledge of more colloquial Spanish, where “pues” functions more like the English “since.” The following Spanish sentence allows the reader to understand that the narrator finds a story funny because he knows the person in question and can therefore imagine them in this scenario: “Yo conocía al ayudante y sabía que había sido novio de Claudia, por lo que la historia me pareció aún más cómica, pues me lo imaginaba convertido en el cíclope del que hablaba Cortázar.” The English translation, which translates “pues” as “then,” implies no causation and reads more like an odd description than a coherent reason for finding something comical: “I knew the assistant and I knew that he had been Claudia's

boyfriend, because of which I found the story to be much more amusing, then I imagined him as the Cyclops that Cortázar talked about.” The translation of the Spanish “risa” as “smile” produces a slightly confusing sentence: “I held my smile until Claudia began to laugh.” To “hold a smile” in English usually means to continue smiling for a prolonged period of time, as when taking a photo. The Spanish “Aguanté la risa hasta que Claudia comenzó una carcajada” leads the reader to understand that the narrator was holding back laughter so as not to offend Claudia, until she began to laugh and he realized that it was okay to do so as well. Another change in meaning that could produce slight confusion for the target reader is the translation of “A esas alturas de 1993 ó 1994” to “At the height of 1993 or 1994.” The term “a esas alturas” in Spanish is simply an informal way of expressing the idea “by that time.” The English translation is confusing because it is hard to imagine something happening “at the height of” more than one year since this phrase refers to the apex of an event and therefore implies a concrete moment in time. A change in verb tense also produces a change in meaning as the Spanish imperfect tense, which describes an action that occurred over an extended period in the past: “hablábamos, en realidad, un lenguaje privado,” is translated to the English conditional: “we would speak, really, in a private language.” “Regresó a paso lento, encubriendo, apenas, un miedo o una vergüenza que no le conocía” becomes “She returned, walking slowly, covering up, barely, a fear or embarrassment that I didn't know her.” At first glance this sentence appears to be faithful to the original but actually a shift in meaning has occurred. The English version implies that Claudia was covering up a specific fear, she was afraid that the narrator did not know her. The original however leads the Spanish language reader to infer that Claudia was covering up a more generalized fear, and fear was something that the narrator had never seen in her before.



Several syntactic and semantic calques appear in this translation which could be taken as a sign that the translator wished to represent the original language in the English version. However, there are significant shifts in meaning throughout this translation and it would appear that they stemmed from Fisherkeller's lack of understanding of Chilean colloquial speech. It is hard to make assumptions about the motivation behind these deviations but I did not find concrete evidence of an overall domesticizing or foreignizing tendency in this translation which leads me to believe that the translator did not have any clear ideologies that guided her work.

#### ANALYSIS OF TEXTS 13 AND 14

TEXT 13: "Incomunicado" by Carmen Rioja

TEXT 14: "Incommunicado" by Carmen Rioja, translated by Frances Riddle

Published in *Palabras Errantes*, January 2014

This translation appeared in a yearlong edition of *Palabras Errantes* devoted to Mexican Speculative Fiction. The piece was published in January of 2014 but I had actually completed the work several months prior to its publication, in July of 2013. At the time that this translation was carried out I had just begun my preliminary research for this study and my translation was only guided by a vague sense of fidelity to the original. I decided to include this piece in my sample of translations from *Palabras Errantes* because I felt that since I was personally responsible for the translation I might be able to provide insight into the choices made by myself and the journal's editor.

One of the first issues I faced in this translation was how to render the title “Incomunicado” into English with a term that could also appear in the body of the text as it does in the Spanish version. I tentatively set the title as “Cut Off” and also used this term where “incomunicado” appeared repeatedly throughout the text. However, I was not totally convinced that “cut off” was the best choice and I indicated my doubts to the editor when I sent my draft of the story for her approval. I listed a few other options, among them “incommunicado,” a borrowing from Spanish that I felt English readers would be able to understand easily. I liked this solution because I felt it had more force than any of the other options and I also liked the idea of using a loan word from Spanish which represented the original title as faithfully as possible without resorting to non-translation. The journal’s editor agreed that “incommunicado” was more forceful, more precise, and that an English speaking audience would have no trouble understanding the meaning of this loan word, making it the best choice.

The next issue I faced was the translation of the opening quote by Julio Cortázar, an excerpt from the novel *Un Tal Lucas*. Since this work had already been translated, I decided to hunt down the equivalent quotation from the English translation by Gregory Rabassa, published as *A Certain Lucas*. I felt that since Rabassa’s translation was the official one, it was a better equivalent for the Cortázar quote than a translation of my own would have been.

In my initial translation of this text I was very careful to maintain the original punctuation and I respected the sentence and the paragraph as a unit almost exactly. However, in the version of the translation that I received back from the magazine’s editor

this feature of my translation had been altered; the editor had changed the punctuation throughout the text. I did not argue with her suggestions. I also respected the Spanish stylistics of the original which allows for sentence fragments and sentences that begin with conjunctions. While strictly speaking this is discouraged in English stylistics, the journal's editor did not object and therefore the Spanish structure is present throughout the translation, in sentences such as "But the seed of doubt is sown."

Literal translation was used frequently throughout this piece, often resulting in sentences that sound less than fluent in English. This is especially noticeable in the maintenance of the Spanish past simple verb tense where the present perfect would sound more natural in English. For example "Quizás mi madre también murió" is translated as "Maybe my mother died too," whereas "Maybe my mother has died too" would read much more fluently. Syntactic calques of Spanish constructions in the passive voice are translated literally to the English creating an unusual effect in the translation. For example "the city center is now the only place where a few can still be found," reflects the Spanish "el centro de la ciudad, ahora es el único lugar en donde todavía se puede encontrar a unos cuantos." Similarly, "where televisions are sold" respects the passive voice of the Spanish "se venden televisores." Further influence of the Spanish original can be seen in the marked lack of contractions in the English translation which combines with the other aforementioned features of the translation to produce a text which has a style quite distinct from contemporary English writing.

This was my very first attempt at literary translation and although a few of the awkward sentences make me cringe a bit, I feel that my translation captured the overall

tone of oppressive unease that characterized the original. After having spent the past year investigating into the fluency model of literary translation to English I have a much greater understanding of the effects that fluency or foreignization may have on a translation. I would say that my personal translation taste favors a more moderate form of foreignization that strikes a balance between readability and maintenance of the source culture. Looking back now at this translation, I feel that some of the literal translations fail to do the original justice since they read clumsily where Rioja's Spanish original did not. If I could do this translation over today I would perhaps choose to use more natural English syntax in some cases. I would however keep the overall foreignized tone of the translation by maintaining some of the atypical structures as well as the marked the lack of contractions in the translation. I would also perhaps now think more critically about the editor's alterations, instead of automatically accepting all of her suggestions.

#### ANALYSIS OF TEXTS 15 AND 16

TEXT 15: "Victor San La Muerte" by Juan Diego Incardona

TEXT 16: "Victor Saint Death" by Juan Diego Incardona, translated by Elsa Treviño

Published in *Palabras Errantes*, October 2012

The narrator of this story describes a garbage crew in Greater Buenos Aires and the workers who form part of the team, particularly one character, in charge of cleaning road kill, known as "Victor Saint Death." This translation shows a close respect for the original, down to the maintenance of punctuation and the sentence and paragraph as a unit. One seven-line sentence is maintained in the English, with semicolons inserted where the original included commas. Such a long sentence is rare in English where stylistic guidelines dictate more concise expression.

There are many nicknames in this piece, translated using a variety of techniques. The nicknames “Pocho” and “Tata” are left untranslated, whereas nicknames with semantic value are translated, such as “el Chueco” to “the Crooked” and “El viejo” to “the Old Fellow.” The use of the definite article in the translated nicknames is noteworthy as this is quite unusual in English epithets. The nickname “Porota” is not translated although the word does have semantic value in Spanish. Possibly, Treviño felt that the English equivalent “Bean” would be too obscure for English readers. Victor, the main character, has more than one nickname in the piece and all are translated. He is “apodado “El mudo”, “La momia” o “San La Muerte”, según la ocasión,” becomes in English “dubbed “the Mute”, “the Mummy” or “Saint Death” depending on the occasion.” There is slight gain in the explanation of the nickname of the two “Fitito” brothers. Whereas Argentine readers would not need much extra information to understand this nickname, “los hermanos Fititos —les decían así porque andaban en un Fitito cada uno,” Treviño specifies the car model in reference so as to paint a clearer picture for the English-speaking audience: “the Fitito brothers —they called them so because each of them drove a little Fiat 600.” The name for the inhabitants the Argentine Chaco province, “chaqueños” is translated as “from the Chaco province.” “El flaco Víctor” is translated as “skinny Victor,” although I would argue that the term “flaco” was not meant as an adjective in this context since the term “flaco” is commonly used in Argentina as a generic term for a male, similar to the English “guy.”

This translation is at times very literal, with syntactic calques that sound less than fluent in English. The passive voice of the Spanish original is maintained in “Not even with bleach can death be cleaned” which reflects the source sentence “Ni con lavandina se

limpia la muerte.” The Spanish construction of the possessive form is transferred to the English version: “Instead, he lived with the superstition of the others,” a quite literal translation of “Él, en cambio, convivía con la superstición de los demás.” “We stayed looking at him” sounds unnatural in English but reflects the Spanish “nos quedábamos mirándolo.” Semantic calques appear in the translation of “bag of residues,” an atypical term in English which belies the Spanish “bolsa de residuo.” Spanish prepositions of movement are also translated literally instead of using the prepositions that would sound more natural in English: “cruzando la zanja y la misma calle Ugarte para seguir, contra viento y marea, hasta San Pedrito,” becomes “crossing the ditch and the same Ugarte Street to continue, against wind and tide, until San Pedrito.” Street names are left untranslated but are clarified as such where the Spanish merely states the names: “salió por Giribone hacia la colectora de la Richieri” to “the truck pulled away and went out onto Giribone Street towards the collector lane of Richieri Avenue,” and “avenida Olavarría” becomes “Olavarría Avenue” in translation.

The Spanish original version of this text contained various colloquial expressions, typical of Argentine Spanish. “Varios salieron a la calle a correr la bola” is naturalized to “several folks came out on the street to spread the word.” The Spanish expression “pegar un ojo” is naturalized in the English “slept a wink;” “tipo” becomes the colloquial British “bloke;” “lo hacían como quien no quiere la cosa,” is translated to the English expression “they did it on the sly” and “vago de porquería” becomes the more descriptive “useless scumbag bum.” The culturally neutral term “desocupado” is naturalized in the English translation to the British culturally-bound term “on the dole.”

In certain cases a metaphor from the source text is translated using an original metaphor that sounds quite interesting in English: “una mañana de cielo encapotado que no se decidía si llover o no llover,” is translated literally as “an overcast morning that couldn’t decide whether to rain or not;” “Víctor sonrió, una sonrisa ancha como la risa,” is translated as “Victor himself smiled a smile broad as laughter.” When two weeks go by with no road accidents involving animals and Victor seems to cheer up, the narrator describes him as “tomando el sol de su veranito de San Juan.” The “veranito de San Juan,” is a reference to the few days of warmth that occur in the middle of winter in Buenos Aires, often around the day of San Juan. In the Spanish original, the possessive “su” leads me to believe that this is a metaphorical reference, describing a respite more than an actual climatic change. The literal English translation “enjoying the sun in his little summer of San Juan” does not explain this cultural reference and will likely be lost on the target reader.

Although nicknames with semantic relevance are translated and colloquialisms are naturalized, this text shows signs of foreignization through the use of literal translation, non-translation and syntactic calques. All in all I believe that this translation shows a respect for the source text and an intention to offer the English reader a glimpse into the context of the original work.

#### ANALYSIS OF TEXTS 17 AND 18

TEXT 17: “Señales” by Krina Ber

TEXT 18: “Signals” by Krina Ber, translated by Adam Fry

Published in *Palabras Errantes*, December 2012

This story describes life in an unnamed city during a period of power, water and gasoline shortages. Although this text was the shortest of all the translations analyzed, it showed the greatest signs of domesticization as it did not follow the original as closely as the other translations studied. Spanish sentence constructions are rarely maintained in the translation. The original sentence structure and order were altered considerably. Long sentences in the Spanish original are broken into shorter sentences that adhere to English stylistic norms.

Fluent English constructions are favored over syntactic calques. For example, “He made his decision based on the fact that the windows faced south” diverges significantly from the Spanish construction “En su decisión pesó no poco el hecho que las ventanas se orientan hacia el sur.” Similarly the Spanish word order was completely restructured in “Street peddlers, eager to protect their wares come rain or shine, quickly made themselves at home in the abandoned vehicles that littered the streets,” although it could have easily been translated in a way that more closely resembled the original structure, “Las carcasas inútiles de carros y camionetas han sido inmediatamente ocupadas por buhoneros deseosos de proteger sus mercancías de la lluvia y el sol.”

Metaphoric language and colloquial terms are neutralized as “palangana” is simply “bowl” and “carcasas inútiles” are “abandoned vehicles.” English colloquialisms are inserted into the translation as in the case of the English expression “rain or shine” which changes the meaning of the original “proteger sus mercancías de la lluvia y el sol.” The expression “rain or shine” in English is used to describe something that will proceed no matter what, whereas the original only refers to weather conditions that would harm the



merchandise. The translation of the Spanish “pues” to the English “then,” shifts meaning slightly as the term implies causation in the Spanish; the English term “because” would perhaps have been a better choice in this sentence given the context.

Information that can be inferred is omitted from this translation in what would best be characterized as editing on the part of the translator. The protagonist’s mother’s state of mind is explicitly stated in the Spanish original as “Agazapada en su cocina oscura la vieja se mortificaba por su lado, intuyendo la preocupación del hijo,” but the detail “se mortificaba por su lado” is not included in the English translation of “Trapped in her darkened kitchen, the old woman would sit, wringing her hands and sensing her son’s concern.” Probably, the translator felt that the context was sufficient to relay this information and therefore did not warrant additional explanation. This choice may reflect the tendency in English writing to avoid explicit statement of what can be inferred. The last lines of the text in Spanish undergo revision to avoid repetition. “Se despojaron de sus bluyines, recogieron palos, pistolas y varas metálicas, arrancaron las plumas a sus gallinas para adornarse con ellas, recogieron palos y varas metálicas y con el hollín de los cauchos se pintaron las caras” is edited in the English translation to avoid repetition: “They stripped off their jeans and collected up sticks, guns and metal rods. They plucked the feathers from their hens to adorn themselves, painted their faces with soot and took up arms.”

Through a clear adherence to English stylistic norms this translation shows more divergence from the Spanish original than any of the other texts analyzed. I believe that this translation demonstrates the clearest signs of domesticization, to such an extent that I would

venture to guess that translator Adam Fry actively sought to achieve fluency in his translation of this story.

## CONCLUSIONS

Through the interaction I've had with established literary translators I sometimes get the feeling that "foreignization" is almost a bad word in translation, despite the fact that Lawrence Venuti is a very well respected translation theorist as well as a major promoter of foreignization. Whenever I hear a translator criticize foreignization, I have to wonder if the main reason the model is so controversial is that it is just so much safer to produce a fluent translation, to edit your English version until it sounds natural to your native ears. Foreignization is risky, which makes it political, bold and brave. I have a lot of respect for foreignizing translators and was glad to find that my analysis of the selections from the three digital literary journals, *Palabras Errantes*, *Words Without Borders*, and *Asymptote*, showed an overall pattern of source-oriented translations. The works were characterized by non-translation of cultural markers and semantic and syntactic calques that allowed the target reader to get a general feel for the source language and culture.

Not all texts were foreignized, a few displayed no clear signs of an attempt to preserve the source culture, but only one text seemed to be clearly weighted towards domesticizing translation techniques. According to David Bellos these translations from Spanish to English should constitute "up translation" from a language of lower prestige to a language of higher prestige. Up translation is usually characterized by a very fluent and domesticized product that shows little respect the source text. The translations analyzed in

this study however showed signs of what Bellos would term “down translation” since they maintained the cultural nuances of the originals through the presence of source terms and structures. Many of these translations to English seemed to use a more formal register than was used in the Spanish originals. This impression may be caused by the antiquated terms that closely matched the Spanish original. In my opinion the most foreignized translations such as Text 2 (“White Sand Black Stone”) and Text 10 (“The Voyage”) were also the most enjoyable to analyze. Through the comparison of these source and target texts it was fascinating to observe the delicate tightrope walk of translators Daniel Hahn and Cristina Vega-Westhoff as they gracefully created foreignized yet beautifully fluid works of literature in English. They achieved this feat by using atypical terms and structures that could still be readily understood by the target reader. They also allowed the source text to shine through in the non-translation of culturally-bound terms. Works like these are proof that foreignization does not need to come at the expense of readability and my hope is that as more translations of this kind are published, more translators will take the leap towards acts of beautiful linguistic acrobatics which are possible when a translator prioritizes a respect for the source culture in a work of translation.

While the fluency model may still reign in translation to English on the whole, in the works of short fiction analyzed here, the translators demonstrated a respect for the original writings. The results of my analysis could be attributed to a variety of causes. Certainly, it is more likely that a translator will take the time to respect the original when the text they are dealing with is short. Also, as most of these translators probably selected the texts themselves, and only later submitted them for publication in the respective digital journals, it is likely that they worked at their leisure, free from deadline pressures or

excessive editorial intervention, at liberty to translate as they pleased. It is also possible that the kind of translator interested in contributing to these types of digital magazines, which do not pay for contributions, are enthusiastic about the writers they choose and therefore more respectful of the source culture. The fact that all of the translations analyzed were published alongside the Spanish original probably encouraged the translator to respect the source text more closely. The evidence I uncovered of a general source-oriented approach across these nine translations may be specific to the Spanish – English language pair. As Spanish becomes more familiar to English speakers, especially in the U.S. which is the second largest Spanish-speaking nation in the world after Mexico, English-language readers are able to understand more and more Spanish terms. This makes the preservation of the source as well as non-translation of culturally-bound words increasingly acceptable. Alternatively, this trend may be a more general product of our globalized age in which the foreign is seen as exotic and interesting since knowledge of other cultures is a mark of one's cosmopolitan status. With this shift in perception a small glimmer of hope remains for the future of literary translators as the couriers of this desirable “otherness.”

The above analysis makes judgements based only on of the product of translation and therefore I can only make assumptions as to the motivations of the translator or editor. The overall source-oriented approach which I detected in the majority of these translations could be the result of an ideology that resists the domesticization of translated texts, or perhaps the translators were working merely under a sense of fidelity to the original, or motivated by other guidelines altogether. From this small sample I cannot draw concrete conclusions as to whether the tendency to maintain cultural elements in translation is becoming a widespread practice among translators. What is certain is that as readers and

translators become more exposed to non-domesticized translations which retain traces of the source culture or language, we may begin to see a shift away from the fluency model which dominates in mainstream publishing. Furthermore, translators may look to these examples of non-fluent translations as forms of art that weave elements of the source language and culture into a highly readable text.

Many modern translation theorists argue in favor of a source-oriented approach to literary translation and criticize the fluency model, especially in translation to English, a language so omnipresent in the global cultural market that it drowns out all other voices. The field of literary translation offers many avenues of study into the fluency model of translation to English. I chose to limit my corpus to newer, online publications of literature in translation for several reasons. The digital online formats meant the content was free to access, easily searchable, and a bilingual corpus was readily available. I also believed that if the fluency model which has reigned over translation to English were ever to be dethroned, this would likely begin in smaller, newer publications which embraced diversity. For a more in-depth study of how the fluency model may be shifting, or not, further research could include a comparison of translations published by larger publishing conglomerates as opposed to the translations put out by smaller independent publishers. Interviews with translators and editors about their views regarding domesticization or foreignization and how this affects the decisions that they make could also provide valuable insight into the process of translation with respect to this topic. It would also be interesting to compare translations published across digital and print media.

“When translators do what is expected of them, they will be seen to have done well” (Hermans 1991:166). Maybe today, thanks to many decades of insistence by the top theorists in Translation Studies, what is increasingly expected of translators is a respect for the culture from which a text originated. I think that this study at least shows that there are many translation scholars, literary professionals, and an audience of readers of world literature who stand behind the notion that literature has no borders and translation has the responsibility to produce texts which are as culturally authentic as their originals. There may be a long way to go before the fluency model of translation to English is a relic of the past but I think we’re on the right track.

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## APPENDIX I: CORPUS

### TEXT 1

**“Arena blanca, piedra negra” by Eduardo Halfon**

**Published in *Words Without Borders*, November 2013**

El joven oficial estaba leyendo las páginas de mi pasaporte con diligencia, con escrúpulo, como si fuesen las páginas de una revista de farándula o de una novela barata. Las sostenía en alto. Las miraba a contraluz. Las raspaba fuerte con la uña de su pulgar. Pensé que en cualquier momento doblaría la esquina de alguna, como marcador, como para volver más tarde a su lectura. Viaja mucho usted, dijo de pronto mientras revisaba todos los sellos. No supe si era una pregunta o un comentario y sólo me quedé callado, observándolo ante mí, sentado del otro lado de un escritorio de metal negro. No tendría aún veinte años. Su rostro era lampiño, bruno, brillante. Su uniforme verde caqui le tallaba demasiado apretado. Parecían ya no importarle los hilos de sudor que caían despacio por su frente y cuello. Como que le gusta viajar a usted, musitó sin verme, usando ese tono abusivo de nuevo militar. No dije nada. Por la puerta abierta entraba el ruido de motos, de camiones, de camionetas, de una ranchera en radio transistor, de truenos en la distancia, de los enjambres de moscas y mosquitos y de todos los hombres que a gritos ofrecían comprar y vender dólares beliceños. Oscilando en la esquina, un viejo ventilador de piso sólo revolvía el calor selvático y húmedo de la tarde.

Era mi primera vez allí, en Melchor de Mencos, último pueblo guatemalteco antes de entrar a Belice. Había salido de la capital al amanecer, y conducido toda la mañana sin detenerme más que una vez, a medio camino, en el lago de Izabal, a echar gasolina y almorzar un caldo de mariscos, un manojito de tortillas negras con queso fresco y loroco, y bastante café.

¿Su domicilio, señor?, me preguntó de pronto el oficial, aún ojeando las páginas de mi pasaporte y anotando mis datos en una enorme bitácora contable. Ciudad de Guatemala, le mentí. ¿Y el propósito de su viaje? Voy a visitar a unos amigos, en Belmopán, le mentí, aunque en realidad no era del todo mentira: me habían invitado a hacer una lectura en la Universidad de Belice, en Belmopán. Viajar por tierra había sido idea mía, para conocer esa ruta, para conocer las hermosas playas de arena blanca de Belice, el idílico mar azul cielo de Belice; una idea que ahora, tras comprobar la distancia y el estado tan paupérrimo de las carreteras, empezaba a cuestionar. ¿Su profesión, señor? Ingeniero, le mentí, como miento siempre, como escribo siempre en los formularios de migración. Es mucho más recomendable y sensato, especialmente en fronteras de cualquier tipo, ser ingeniero que escritor.

El oficial se quedó callado, y despacio, con todo el letargo del trópico, continuó anotando mis datos.

Afuera estaba nublado y denso y el cielo parecía a punto de reventar. Tras secarme la frente con la mano, me puse a mirar un inmenso mapa de Guatemala colgado en la pared, justo detrás del oficial, y recordé cuando de niño, en los años setenta, había ganado un premio en el colegio por hacer el mejor dibujo del mapa nacional. Mi dibujo, por supuesto, aún incluía el entonces departamento de Belice, el más grande, ubicado en el extremo norte del país. No sería hasta 1981 que Belice lograría su independencia —y hasta 1992 que ésta fuese



reconocida oficialmente por Guatemala—, dejando así de formar la parte superior de aquel mapa que yo aprendí a dibujar de niño. Nunca he podido dibujar muy bien. Pero esa vez, recuerdo, me esmeré. Y mi premio, que recibí atónito de la mano de mi maestra, fue un pequeño mango verde. Aún no puedo ver un mapa del país sin antojárseme un mango verde. Aún no puedo ver un mapa del país sin pensar que Guatemala quedó decapitada.

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Esto no sirve, señor.

Tardé un poco en comprender que el oficial, sin subir la mirada, y apenas audible por encima del silbido del ventilador, me estaba hablando a mí.

¿Cómo dice?, le pregunté. Que esto no sirve, dijo, cerrando mi pasaporte y dejándolo caer sobre el escritorio de metal, como con repudio, como si fuese algo tieso y podrido. Su pasaporte, señor, venció el mes pasado. Sentí un ligero golpe en el vientre. No puede ser, balbuceé. El oficial, inalterado, sólo continuó garabateando algo en la vieja bitácora. ¿Era posible? ¿Hacía cuántos años que lo había tramitado? ¿Hacía cuánto tiempo que ni siquiera había verificado la fecha de vencimiento? Estiré la mano y recogí el librillo azul del escritorio y lo abrí a la primera página. Vencido, en efecto, hacía un mes. No sirve, espetó el oficial hacia abajo, hacia las páginas rayadas y amarillentas de la vieja bitácora, y por un momento creí entender que el que no servía era yo. ¿Y ahora?, le pregunté. ¿Y ahora qué, señor?, sin verme. ¿No hay otra manera de entrar a Belice? Ninguna, señor. ¿No puedo cruzar la frontera con mi cédula de identidad? Meneó la cabeza una sola vez, lapidario. Belice, dijo, no forma parte del convenio centroamericano. Era cierto. Todos los países centroamericanos habían firmado un convenio permitiendo el libre paso fronterizo a sus ciudadanos —todos, claro, salvo Belice. Suspiré, ya imaginándome el camino de vuelta a la capital, ya haciendo el cálculo matemático de todas las horas y todos los kilómetros de ida y vuelta, atravesando el territorio nacional casi entero de ida y vuelta, en un mismo día. Abrí mi cartera de cuero para guardar el pasaporte y me sorprendió ver allí el cartón rojo. No se me había ocurrido. De hecho, aunque se me hubiese ocurrido, ese preciado cartón rojo generalmente se quedaba en casa, y no hubiera creído encontrarlo allí, en la cartera de cuero que siempre viaja conmigo, y en la cual mantengo otras tarjetas de crédito (por si acaso), credencial de seguro médico (por si acaso), licencia de buceo (por si acaso), un par de preservativos (por si acaso). Sonreí triunfante. Aquí tiene, le dije al oficial, y lo coloqué bajo su mirada, sobre las páginas mismas de la bitácora. ¿Y esto?, farfulló perplejo, aun desconfiado. Es que soy muchos, le dije con algo de sátira. Pero hoy, le dije, soy dos.

El oficial, quizás por primera vez, alzó la mirada, y me observó detenidamente, escépticamente, mientras sostenía un librillo en cada mano, un pasaporte en cada mano: el guatemalteco en la derecha, y el español en la izquierda.

Permítame, y se puso de pie. En su espalda verde caqui crecía una mancha oscura y redonda de sudor.

Caminó despacio hacia un escritorio más grande y más importante donde estaba sentado un señor mofletudo, calvo, con un grueso bigote ceniciento y gafas de lectura, y trajeado en el mismo uniforme verde caqui. Su jefe, supuse. El joven oficial le entregó los pasaportes y me señaló y los dos hombres se pusieron a revisar mis documentos, a compararlos, a juzgarlos, mientras se susurraban no sé qué cosas. De pronto el oficial mayor se quitó las gafas de lectura. Alzó la mirada hacia mí y se quedó observándome unos segundos. Como enfurecido por algo, pensé. O como asustado por algo, pensé. O como intentando descubrir algo en mi rostro, pensé, quizás algún detalle o gesto que le

comprobara mi identidad. Luego bajó la vista, le devolvió mis dos pasaportes al joven oficial y, buscando sus gafas de lectura que le colgaban del cuello, regresó su atención a los papeles sobre el escritorio.

Firme usted aquí, me dijo el joven oficial al nomás sentarse, indicándome una línea en blanco en la bitácora, a la par de mi nombre. Firmé gustoso, en letras pomposas y estilizadas. El oficial selló la bitácora con demasiada fuerza, acaso con la furia del derrotado, y me entregó ambos pasaportes. Siguiendo, declamó en forma de despedida hacia la cola de personas esperando su turno. Yo guardé todo en la cartera de cuero, di media vuelta sin prisa y sin decir nada, y ya marchándome de la oficina de migración, ya oyendo las primeras gotas de lluvia sobre las láminas del techo, advertí que el oficial gordo y bigotudo me miraba serio por encima de sus gafas.

Afuera llovía fuerte. Esquivé rápido a los vendedores de chicles y golosinas, a los vendedores de naranja agria con pepitoria, a los vendedores de dólares beliceños con fajos de billetes sucios en las manos y cangureras de nailon atadas a las cinturas, y me puse a correr entre las oleadas de lluvia hacia donde había dejado aparcado el carro. Al nomás llegar abrí la puerta y entré y me apuré a insertar la llave y arrancar el motor. Me quedé quieto, medio empapado o quizás medio sudado, nada más oyendo el repentino chubasco contra la carrocería, y los truenos en la lejanía de la selva petenera, y el chirrido metálico y agobiante de una batería muerta.

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Aquí le va a costar hallar a un camionero que quiera ayudarlo. Tenía acento salvadoreño o quizás nicaragüense. Llevaba puestas unas botas de vaquero de piel de cocodrilo. Su camisa de botones estaba abierta y sobre su corazón, en tinta verde, tenía un tatuaje de otro corazón atravesado por una flecha y por una cinta con el nombre de alguien. De su mujer, supuse. O de alguna de sus mujeres. Llevaba un machete largo en una funda de cuero negro colgada de su cinturón. Y yo de inmediato, al verlo acercarse y sonreírme con sus dientes de plata, sentí una ráfaga de desconfianza y temor. Me había dicho que su camión era aquél de allá, ve, el blanquito, que iba camino a México, que se llamaba Roldán. No quise preguntarle si ése era su nombre o su apellido. Tampoco quise preguntarle qué llevaba en su camión.

Yo había tenido que permanecer dentro del carro casi una hora, esperando a que menguara la lluvia. De vez en cuando abría un poco la puerta para ventilar el calor y el humo de mi cigarro (la ventanilla eléctrica, claro, no funcionaba), pero llovía demasiado fuerte y el agua se entraba enseguida y tuve entonces que curtirme una hora allí dentro, en mi propio humo y vapor. Creí ver, en varias ocasiones, a través del vidrio y de las sábanas de lluvia, al oficial bigotudo parado en la puerta de la oficina de migración, quizás observando la lluvia, quizás observándome a mí.

Aquí ningún camionero le echará una mano, dijo Roldán. Dizque andan con prisa los compañeros. Se rascó la barriga. Pero son puros cuentos, dijo. Lo que pasa es que son algo crueles.

Con un par de chiflidos, llamó a un muchacho adolescente que pasó caminando por ahí. Ayúdame a empujar, vos, le dijo al muchacho, que accedió de mala gana. Usted póngalo en neutro, me gritó Roldán, y cuando yo le diga, meta segunda y trate de arrancar. Intentamos tres veces. El motor ni siquiera reaccionó.

Ay, mi rey, dijo Roldán ensanchando su sonrisa de plata. Esa batería ya no da. El muchacho, sin decir nada, se había esfumado.

Me bajé del carro. Le extendí a Roldán la cajetilla de Camel y el tomó un cigarro y ambos nos quedamos fumando un momento en silencio. El sol había vuelto a salir. En la distancia, una nube de neblina tibia cubría la montaña. ¿Tiene usted cables?, me preguntó de pronto. Creo que sí, le dije, en la maletera. Mi camión sólo anda con batería de veinticuatro voltios, dijo. Hay que hallar a un camionero con batería de doce voltios. Tal vez así logramos cargarla. Me pidió otro cigarro. Para luego, dijo, y lo colocó sobre su oreja. ¿Desde dónde viene usted, pues?, me preguntó, y le expliqué que había salido de la capital esa misma mañana, que iba camino a Belice, que quería cruzar a Belice, que quería llegar a las playas de arena blanca de Belice. No con esa su batería, mi rey, dijo siempre sonriendo. Pero no se preocupe. Ya mero se la arreglamos. Dios mediante.

Roldán detuvo a dos camioneros, y ambos, desde sus cabinas, sólo negaron con la cabeza y siguieron su camino. Al rato llegó el dueño del camión que estaba aparcado a mi lado. Roldán se acercó al él y le explicó la situación y el tipo le dijo que sí tenía batería de doce voltios, pero que no podía darme carga. ¿Y por qué no, papá?, le preguntó Roldán, y el tipo sólo meneó la cabeza, apenado. Roldán le insistió de tal manera que el camionero finalmente aceptó. Conectamos las dos baterías. El camionero encendió su motor, y lo dejamos correr unos minutos, y nada. Luego lo dejamos correr unos minutos más, y yo volví a intentar, y otra vez nada. El camionero desconectó los cables, se subió a su cabina y, casi ofendido conmigo, como si yo le hubiese robado algo, se marchó.

Roldán sacó su celular y marcó un número. Pidió una grúa. No se inquiete, me dijo. Es de un amigo, me dijo, quien en nada le cambia la batería aquí en Melchor de Mencos, del otro lado del puente, y puede seguir usted su camino a Belice.

Sentí algo en las rodillas. Acaso impotencia. Acaso una devastadora soledad. Acaso el pánico de estar ingresando, poco a poco, a una extensa telaraña de estafadores. Roldán se quedó fumando a mi lado hasta que llegó su amigo con la grúa y negoció el precio con él y lo amenazó con tratarme bien. Le agradecí. Le ofrecí unos cuantos billetes, que rechazó con obstinación. Le dije, quizás por miedo a quedarme solo y varado a media selva petenera, que me dejara invitarlo a una cerveza en el pueblo. Es que yo también tengo que seguir mi camino, dijo negando con la cabeza. Me subí al asiento de pasajero de la grúa. Olía a sudor, a pescado rancio, a aceite quemado. Del espejo retrovisor colgaba un crucifijo de plástico color rosa, una postal laminada de una rubia mostrando las tetas, y dos dados de peluche, uno blanco y el otro negro. Leí pintado en el vidrio, hasta arriba, en grandes letras de oro: cristo es mi norte. Pero no se le vaya a ocurrir viajar a Belice de noche, me dijo Roldán sosteniendo la puerta. Mejor quédese usted en el pueblo, cene sabroso, duerma bien, y salga mañana tempranito, con calma. Volví a sentir ese mismo algo en las rodillas. Ya veremos, le dije. Cerré la puerta. De veras, gritó por encima del recio motor de la grúa. Puede ser peligroso andar por allí de noche.

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No parecía un taller de mecánica. No tenía ningún rótulo. Era nada más un pequeño predio con suelo de tierra, encerrado por tres paredes de adobe, y con un portón de metal que daba a la calle. Había herramientas tiradas y amontonadas por doquier. En una esquina estaba aparcado un Mercedes Benz de los años setenta, quizás blanco, todo destartado y corroído. A su lado, un niño de dos o tres años estaba sentado en el suelo de tierra, completamente desnudo. Jugaba con un puñado de tarugos y tuercas. El tipo de la grúa era también el dueño y el único mecánico allí. Se llamaba Nicasio. Tras conectar la batería a una máquina vetusta, me confirmó que, en efecto, ya estaba inservible. Me dijo que él

podía conseguir e instalar una nueva, de lujo, importada, a muy buen precio. Me dijo que le pagara la mitad por adelantado. Me dijo que le dejara las llaves del carro. Me dijo que le diera un par de horas, que había un comedor en la esquina donde podía esperar, tomarme algo, que él me buscaría allí al haber terminado el trabajo. Vi mi reloj. Eran ya las cuatro de la tarde. Saqué mi mochila del maletero y me dirigí hacia el portón. El niño desnudo me miraba desparramado en un charco de lodo.

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Llegué caminando a un pequeño parque, en una cuchilla. No había nadie. No había brisa, ni sombra, ni alivio. En la entrada, mal pintado encima de un arco blancuzco, un rótulo daba la bienvenida al pueblo. Saqué el último cigarro de la cajetilla y me senté a fumar en una banca aún medio mojada. Casi de inmediato se acercó un muchacho con varios sacos de semillas. ¿Le doy algo, don? Hay maní, dijo. Hay habas, marañón, macadamia, almendra salada. Le compré una bolsita de semillas de marañón. Tras cobrarme se sentó a mi lado. Le pregunté por el origen del nombre del pueblo, Melchor de Mencos. Dicen por ahí, dijo, que ése era el nombre de un general que venció a los británicos. Siglos atrás, dijo. Pero saber si será cierto, dijo. Alzó la mirada hacia la carretera, como buscando a alguien, o como si alguien lo estuviera buscando a él. También me quedé viendo hacia la carretera. Vi a un señor de piel tostada, dando pequeños pasitos hacia delante, como bailando hacia delante. Luego vi a un camión transportando, en la parte trasera, a una escuálida vaca blanca. Luego vi a tres niños montados en una sola bicicleta. ¿Y usted anda de paso?, me preguntó el muchacho. Algo así, le dije. Me terminé mi cigarro en silencio.

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Caminé frente a una niña babeada de rojo y correteando a un grupo de polluelos. Su vestido blanco parecía ya teñido de rojo. Sus medias blancas y flojas parecían ya teñidas de rojo. Su diadema y sus zapatillas negras de charol estaban olvidadas detrás de ella, junto a la puerta abierta de una iglesia evangélica por donde salían los cantos de los feligreses y del predicador. La niña sostenía media granada en sus manos morenas. De pronto se llevaba la media granada a la boca y le daba un buen mordisco y se ponía a dispararles balines rojos a los polluelos.

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Caminé frente a un señor recostado contra el tronco de un almendro. Estaba sentado en la grama, con las piernas extendidas. Aprovechaba, supuse, la sombra del almendro. Tenía puesto un pantalón negro y una camisola blanca y una corbata negra. Tenía un periódico en el regazo. Al acercarme aún más, noté que había un círculo verde en cada una de sus sienes. Eran dos rodajas de limón, prensadas allí con una cinta de zapatos que se había amarrado alrededor de la cabeza. Pequeñas gotas chorreaban por todo su rostro, quizás de limón o de sudor o de ambas cosas. Vení te la chupo vos gringo, creí escuchar que susurró a mis espaldas, ya alejándome con prisa del almendro. Pero al volver la mirada me pareció que el señor estaba profundamente dormido.

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Entré a una abarrotería, en la calle principal y bulliciosa del pueblo. Un anciano estaba apoyado contra el mostrador, apenas de pie, apenas sosteniendo un octavito ya casi

vacío de aguardiente. Dígame, me dijo una señora chaparra del otro lado de las rejas. Me acerqué. La saludé, descubriendo a través de las rejas que sólo vendía cigarros nacionales. Le pedí una cajetilla de Rubios. El anciano balbuceó algo. La señora me pasó la cajetilla por entre las rejas, y yo entonces le pasé unos cuantos billetes. El anciano se acercó un poco a mí y volvió a balbucear algo, con su mano extendida. Todo él apestaba a orina. Deje de molestar, lo regañó la señora. Y usted ignórela nomás, me dijo, devolviéndome unas cuantas monedas a través de las rejas, que luego quise entregarle al anciano. Pero su vieja mano no logró sostenerlas y las monedas cayeron al suelo. Me agaché a recogerlas. Cuando volví a ponerme de pie, allí, justo a mi lado, estaba el oficial gordo y bigotudo de migración: siempre serio, siempre en su uniforme verde caquí, siempre con sus gafas de lectura colgándole del cuello, pero ahora acompañado por un hombre en botas de vaquero y sombrero de vaquero y con unos inmensos anteojos oscuros y un palillo entre los dientes y una pistola negra bien metida entre el pantalón. Me sequé la frente con la manga de la playera. Salí casi corriendo a la calle principal.

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Una enorme guacamaya roja estaba perchada en un palo de escoba, en el fondo del comedor. De vez en cuando se rascaba el pecho con el pico o lanzaba un grito o un agudo silbido. Su plumaje rojo me pareció triste y opaco. Sobre cada una de las cuatro mesas había una botella de plástico con atomizador. Por si acaso, me dijo la señorita al sentarme. Es que es medio chiflada, dijo mirando a la enorme guacamaya. A veces le agarra por atacar a la gente, dijo. Pero un chorro de agua la asusta.

Abrí la cajetilla nueva de Rubios y encendí uno y de inmediato empecé a sentirme mejor, a recuperar el aliento. Desde la cocina, detrás de una cortinilla de abalorios, me llegaba el rumor de voces femeninas, de risas, de gemidos, de un merengue en la radio, del retintín de platos y vasos. La guacamaya me miraba soñolienta desde su palo.

La misma señorita salió por la cortinilla de abalorios, cargando un azafate, y caminó hacia mí. Noté que estaba descalza. Noté que ahora llevaba a un bebé amarrado a su espalda (¿o lo tenía antes y yo no lo vi?) con una larga faja azul. El bebé dormía. Aquí tiene, me dijo, y colocó sobre la mesa un cenicero, una botella de cerveza Gallo, un vaso pequeño. Le agradecí. ¿No quiere usted comer algo?, me preguntó casi avergonzada, y le dije que por ahora no, que gracias, que tal vez más tarde. Un perro callejero quiso entrar al comedor, pero ella lo espantó con un aplauso. Luego se quedó allí parada, abrazando el azafate contra sus pechos rollizos, quizás esperando algo. Le pregunté por qué se llamaba Comedor Fallabón. Es que así le dicen a esta colonia, dijo. Antes, dijo, Fallabón era una aldea propia, aquí merito, pero ahora ya forma parte de Melchor de Mencos (me enteraría después de que el nombre de la aldea, Fallabón, viene de un fuego y estallido que hubo allí cerca, en un almacenamiento de madera, en 1950; es un anglicismo, derivado de las palabras en inglés para fuego y estallido: fire y boom). El bebé soltó un quejido y la señorita estiró una mano hacia atrás y le acarició la mejilla con un dedo. ¿Y ése es su carro, pues, en el taller de don Nica? Así es, le dije. Ella hizo un chasquido con la lengua como diciendo buena suerte, o como diciendo qué pena. Le pregunté si podía recomendarme un hotel, que a lo mejor tendría que pasar la noche, y ella pensó un momento y luego me dijo que el hotel La Cabaña era bueno, que quedaba allí nomás, en la calle principal. Hasta piscina hay, dijo. Hotel La Cabaña, repetí, como para no olvidarlo, y mientras me secaba el sudor de la frente con una servilleta de papel, vi que algo pequeño y oscuro estaba subiendo por la pared del fondo. Tal vez una araña. Tal vez un alacrán. ¿Y la guacamaya es suya?, le



pregunté a la señorita. Ella sonrió. Ésa es de aquí, dijo, pero no entendí si del comedor o de la colonia o del pueblo entero. ¿Tiene nombre? Bien tiene, dijo. Se llama Gómez, dijo. La guacamaya gritó algo, quizás porque había oído su nombre y quería participar en la conversación. Aplasté mi cigarro en el cenicero. ¿Es macho?, le pregunté a la señorita y ella sólo soltó una risa y alzó los hombros y dijo que a lo mejor, que eso nadie lo sabía. Advertí que las baldosas del piso, debajo de la guacamaya, estaban cubiertas de heces blancas y grises. Permiso, susurró la señorita, y regresó a la cocina.

Me serví un trago de cerveza con bastante espuma. La cerveza estaba tibia pero me cayó bien. Me serví otro trago. Encendí un cigarro y respiré hondo. Acerqué la botella de agua, por si la guacamaya decidía bajarse de su palo. Abrí mi mochila y estaba por sacar un libro para leer un rato cuando sentí la presencia de alguien a mis espaldas. Traénos dos cervezas, hija, gritó el oficial bigotudo.

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Me saludaron serios, nada más con la mirada, y se ubicaron en una mesa enfrente de mí. La señorita salió por la cortinilla de abalorios. Cargaba una botella de cerveza en cada mano. El bebé aún dormía atado a su espalda. Aquí tiene, don Francisco, dijo. El oficial musitó algo, quizás agradeciéndole. Había sacado un pañuelo rojo de un bolsillo de su uniforme verde caqui. Terminó de enjugarse el sudor del cuello y la cara. Luego tomó un sorbo largo de cerveza y se limpió los labios y el bigote grisáceo con el pañuelo rojo. El otro hombre extendió una mano y agarró fuerte el antebrazo de la señorita y la jaló hacia él hasta sentarla en su regazo. ¿Tenés carnitas?, le preguntó en un susurro libidinoso, su mano de uñas largas prensándole el cuello, como un garfio. Me pareció que su tono de voz era demasiado femenino. Bien hay, dijo ella, sin alzar la mirada del suelo. El bebé en su espalda se meneó, gimió. ¿Y chicharrón tenés? También nos queda, dijo ella, su voz ahogada, su mirada siempre en el suelo. Pues andá a traernos una orden de carnitas y una de chicharrón, dijo, y le dio un empujón fuerte hacia la cocina. Ella se tambaleó un poco. Ahorita mismo, dijo, recuperando el balance. El hombre se quitó los anteojos oscuros y el sombrero de vaquero y sacó la pistola negra y puso todo sobre la mesa. Aún mordiendo el palillo, levantó la mano derecha como si estuviera jurando ante un juez. Y si se me acerca ese pájaro de mierda, dijo, por Dios que le meto un par de plumazos.

Ambos hombres se rieron, recio, cacareado, quizás mirándome. La señorita se escabulló, de prisa y cabizbaja y agitando al bebé.

Yo quise fumar. Noté que el cigarro en mis dedos temblaba un poco. No podía dejar de mirar esa mano sucia y regordeta en el aire, y aún mirándola, pensé de pronto en el infarto que mi abuelo polaco había sufrido a final de los años setenta. Yo era muy niño entonces, pero aún recuerdo el llanto descontrolado de mi mamá al recibir la llamada del hospital. Mi abuelo tuvo suerte. Fue un infarto menor. Se recuperó rápido. Pero como consecuencia, y siguiendo los tres consejos de su médico: dejó de fumar tabaco, empezó a beber a diario un par de onzas de whisky (para los nervios, decía), y adquirió el hábito de caminar. Caminaba mucho, todas las mañanas, como ejercicio. Salía de su casa muy temprano y caminaba por su barrio. A veces hasta un par de horas. A veces yo lo acompañaba. Y durante una de esas caminatas, mientras andaba él solo al final de la avenida de Las Américas, justo enfrente de la escultura en homenaje al papa Juan Pablo II, una moto con dos tipos se detuvo a su lado. Que lo derribaron al suelo, nos decía con escándalo. Que le asestaron un golpe en la cabeza, nos decía mostrándonos dónde. Que habían querido secuestrarlo, nos decía quizás ya exagerando un simple hurto. Que le

robaron todo lo que llevaba, nos decía ora indignado, o casi todo, nos decía ora orgulloso. Que logró quedarse, nos decía, con el anillo de piedra negra que usaba en el meñique derecho. A veces nos decía que suplicó con ellos hasta quedarse con su anillo. A veces nos decía que forcejeó con ellos hasta quedarse con su anillo. A veces nos decía que luchó contra ellos hasta quedarse con su anillo. La versión variaba dependiendo del paso del tiempo, o de su nostalgia, o de su estado de ánimo, o de la persona que le estuviese preguntando (mi abuelo siempre entendió, acaso a un nivel intuitivo, que una historia es en realidad muchas historias). Había comprado ese anillo en el 45, le gustaba decirnos, en Nueva York, su primera parada en ruta a Guatemala después de ser liberado del campo de concentración nazi. Le gustaba decirnos que en Nueva York había pagado por él cuarenta dólares. Y lo usó durante el resto de su vida, durante los próximos sesenta años, en el meñique derecho, en forma de luto por sus padres y hermanos y amigos y todos los demás exterminados por los nazis en guetos y campos de concentración. Hace unos años, al morir mi abuelo, ese anillo le quedó a uno de los hermanos de mi madre, que lloró de emoción al heredarlo y decidió guardarlo en la caja fuerte de su oficina. No tenía ningún valor económico. Era una piedra negra cualquiera, en una montura dorada cualquiera. Pero no hace mucho, alguien se metió a esa oficina durante la noche y logró abrir la caja fuerte y robarse todo su contenido, incluido el anillo de piedra negra de mi abuelo.

Y yo seguía mirando, ante mí, en el dedo anular de esa mano sucia y regordeta que ahora sostenía una tortilla rellena de carnitas y chicharrón, un anillo muy parecido al anillo de mi abuelo. O quizás era exacto al anillo de mi abuelo. Quizás era exactamente la misma piedra negra, y exactamente la misma montura de metal dorado, y tenía exactamente la misma forma y tamaño. O al menos todo era exacto al anillo en mi memoria, al anillo como yo lo recordaba o como yo quería recordarlo, en el meñique derecho y pálido y algo combado de mi abuelo. Y aunque lo sabía imposible, aun descabellado, aun absurdo, no pude evitar imaginarme que ese anillo, en esa mano regordeta y grasosa, era, en efecto, el anillo de piedra negra de mi abuelo. No uno parecido. No uno exacto. Sino el mismo. El que mi abuelo había comprado en Nueva York en el 45. El que había usado durante el resto de su vida en el meñique derecho. El que había logrado salvar tras vencer o convencer, al final de la avenida de las Américas, al final de los años setenta, a unos ladrones o acaso secuestradores. El que al morir le había heredado a uno de los hermanos de mi madre. El que alguien se había robado de una caja fuerte, una noche, sin jamás saber el ladrón que se estaba robando; sin jamás saber el ladrón que en esa insignificante y sombría piedra negra aún se reflejaban perfectamente los rostros de los padres exterminados de mi abuelo (Samuel y Masha), y los rostros de las dos hermanas exterminadas de mi abuelo (Ula y Rushka), y el rostro del hermano exterminado de mi abuelo (Zalman), y los rostros de tantos hombres exterminados y mujeres exterminadas y niños exterminados y niñas exterminadas y bebés exterminados mientras dormían en los brazos de sus madres, mientras soñaban en las cámaras de gas; sin jamás saber el ladrón que en una pequeña piedra negra aún se podía oír el murmullo de todas esas voces, de tantas voces, entonando en coro el rezo de los muertos.

La guacamaya de pronto lanzó un alarido y extendió las alas y todavía perchada en el palo se puso a batirlas con ánimo, con desesperanza, como queriendo volar.

## TEXT 2

“White Sand, Black Stone” by Eduardo Halfon, translated by Daniel Hahn

The young officer was reading the pages of my passport diligently, scrupulously, as though they were the pages of a gossip magazine or a cheap novel. He held them up. He looked at them against the light. He scratched them hard with the nail of his index finger. It occurred to me that at any moment he might fold over the corner of one of the pages, marking it, as though planning to return to his reading later. You travel a lot, he said suddenly as he went over all the stamps. I didn't know whether this was a question or an observation and remained silent, watching him sitting there in front of me, on the far side of a black metal desk. He couldn't have been twenty. His face was beardless, dark brown, gleaming. His green khaki uniform fitted him too tightly. He seemed unbothered by the threads of sweat that ran slowly down his forehead and neck. So you like traveling, he mused without looking at me, in that contemptuous tone of a new soldier. I considered telling him that all our journeys are really one single journey, with multiple stops and layovers. I considered telling him that every journey, any journey, is not linear, and is not circular, and it never ends. I considered telling him that every journey is meaningless. But I didn't say anything. Through the open door I could make out the noise of motorcycles, trucks, vans, a ranchera sung on a transistor radio, thunder in the distance, the swarms of flies and mosquitos and the men shouting offers to buy and sell Belizean dollars. Revolving in the corner, an old floor fan was just circulating the humid afternoon jungle heat.

It was my first time there, in Melchor de Mencos, the last Guatemalan town before crossing into Belize. I had left the capital early in the morning, and driven to the border only stopping once, at the halfway point, at Lake Izabal, to put in some gasoline and have some lunch—a seafood broth, a handful of dark tortillas with queso fresco and loroco flowers, and plenty of coffee.

Señor, your place of residence? the officer asked me all of a sudden, still looking through the pages of my passport and jotting down my details in a huge accounting ledger. Guatemala City, I lied, although it wasn't altogether a lie. And the reason for your trip to Belize? I'm going to visit some friends, in Belmopán, I lied, although that wasn't altogether a lie either: I had been invited to give a reading at the University of Belize, in Belmopán; traveling by land had been my idea, to get to know that route, to get to know Belize's beautiful white sand beaches, Belize's idyllic turquoise blue sea—an idea that now, having ascertained the distance and the terribly poor state of the highways, I was starting to question. And your profession, señor? Engineer, I lied, as I always lie, as I always write on immigration forms. It's far more advisable and prudent, especially at a border of any kind, to be an engineer than a writer.

The officer said nothing, and slowly, with all the lethargy of the tropics, continued to note down my details.

Outside it was cloudy and thick and the sky looked ready to burst. After wiping my forehead with my hand, I started looking at a huge map of Guatemala that was stuck on the wall, just behind the officer, and I remembered how, as a boy, in the seventies, I had won a prize at school for having drawn the best map of the country. My drawing, of course, still included the then province of Belize, the largest one, located in the far north. It wouldn't be till 1981 that Belize would gain its independence—and till 1992 for it to be recognized by Guatemala—thereby ceasing to be the upper part of this map that I'd learned to draw as a boy. I was never very good at drawing. But that one time, I remember, I really made an effort. And my prize, which I received with some astonishment from the hand of my



teacher, was a small green mango. I still can't see a map of the country without thinking of a green mango. I still can't see a map of the country without thinking that Guatemala, in a more than figurative sense, had been decapitated.

\* \* \*

This is no good, señor.

It took me a moment to understand that the officer, without looking up, and barely audible over the wheezing of the fan, was talking to me.

What did you say? I asked. I said this is no good, he said, closing my passport and dropping it onto the metal desk, as if with disgust, as if it were something stiff and rotten. Your passport, señor, expired last month. I felt a light blow to my gut. That's not possible, I stammered. The officer, impassive, just kept scribbling something in the old ledger. Was it possible? How long had it been since I'd gotten it? How long since I'd even checked the expiration date? I reached out and picked up the blue booklet from the desk and opened it on the page. It had indeed expired, a month ago. It's no good, the officer hissed down toward the ruled yellowish pages of the old ledger, and for a moment I thought he meant that what wasn't any good was me. So what now? I asked. So what now what, señor? without looking at me. Is there no other way I can get into Belize? None, señor. I can't cross the border with my ID card? He shook his head just once, definite. Belize, he said, is not a part of the Central America agreement. It was true. All the Central American countries had recently signed an accord allowing their citizens free passage across their borders—all of them, of course, except Belize. I sighed, already imagining my drive back to the capital, already calculating all the hours and all the kilometers here and back, crossing almost the entire territory of Guatemala here and back, all in a single day. I opened my leather pouch to put the passport away and was surprised to see the red cover there. It hadn't occurred to me. In fact, even if it had occurred to me, I usually leave that red one at home, and I wouldn't have expected to find it there, in the leather pouch I always travel with, and in which I keep other credit cards (just in case), my medical insurance card (just in case), my diving license (just in case), a couple of condoms (just in case). I gave a triumphant smile. Here you go, I said to the officer, and I held it under his gaze, over the same pages of the ledger. What's this? he spluttered, confused, still suspicious. I am many, I said to him somewhat satirically. But today, I said, I am two.

The officer, perhaps for the first time, raised his eyes, and looked at me slowly, skeptically, as I held a booklet in each hand, a passport in each hand: the Guatemalan one in my right, the Spanish one in my left.

Excuse me, and he stood up. On his green khaki back a dark round patch of sweat was growing.

He walked slowly toward a bigger and more important desk, at which sat a chubby-cheeked gentleman, bald, with a thick ash-colored mustache and reading glasses, and dressed in the same green khaki uniform. His boss, I presumed. The young officer handed him the passports and pointed at me and the two men began to go through my documents, comparing them, judging them, whispering I don't know what. Suddenly the older officer took off his reading glasses. He looked up and stared at me for a few moments. As though something in me had enraged him. Or alarmed him. Or as though trying to find something in my face, perhaps some detail or expression that would prove my identity. Then he lowered his gaze, handed my passports back to the young officer, and feeling for the

reading glasses that were hanging round his neck, returned his attention to the papers on the desk.

Sign here, said the young officer no sooner than he had sat down, pointing at an empty line on the ledger, beside my name. I signed with relish, in a flowery, stylized hand. The officer stamped the ledger way too hard, maybe with the rage of the defeated, and handed me both passports. Next, he shouted toward the line of people who were waiting their turn behind me. I put everything away in the leather pouch, turned away unhurriedly, and without a word, as I was already leaving the immigration office, already hearing the drops of rain on the corrugated tin plates of the roof, I noticed that the mustached officer was watching me seriously over the top of his glasses.

Outside it was raining hard. I quickly dodged the sellers of chewing gum and other sweets, the sellers of sour oranges with pumpkinseed, the sellers of Belizean dollar with wads of dirty bills in their hands and nylon backpacks tied round their waists, and I started running through the surges of rain to where I had left the car: an old sapphire-colored Saab that a friend used to lend me, for traveling around the country.

As soon as I arrived I opened the door and got in and hurriedly put in the key and started up the engine. I sat still, half soaked in rain, or perhaps half soaked in sweat, just listening to the sudden shower against the bodywork, and to the thunder in the distance of the Petén jungle, and to the unbearable metallic creaking of a dead battery.

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You're going to have trouble finding a trucker who'll help you here.

His accent sounded Salvadorean, or perhaps Nicaraguan. He was wearing crocodile-skin cowboy boots. His button-down shirt was open, and over his heart, in green ink, he had a tattoo of another heart with an arrow through it and circled by a ribbon with somebody's name. His woman, I presumed. Or one of his women. He had a long machete in a black leather sheath hanging from his belt. And immediately, as I saw him approach and smile at me with his silver teeth, I felt a flash of mistrust and panic and I was about to shut my eyes and tell him please, just the money, let me keep my credit cards and the rest of my papers. But he quickly greeted me and told me that his truck was that one over there, the white one, that he was headed for Mexico, that his name was Roldán. I didn't want to ask if that was his first or last name. Nor did I want to ask what he was carrying in his truck.

I'd had to stay in the car for nearly an hour, waiting for the rain to subside. From time to time I would open the door a little to air out the heat and my cigarette smoke (the electric window, of course, was not working). But it was raining too heavily and the water would come in at once and so I had to fester in there for an hour, submerged in my own smoke and steam. On several occasions I thought I saw—through the windshield and the sheets of rain—the mustached officer standing at the door to the immigration office, maybe watching the rain, maybe watching me.

No trucker here is going to give you a hand, said Roldán. My compañeros will say they're in a hurry. He scratched his stomach. But they're making it up, he said. They're just a bit cruel.

With a couple of whistles he summoned over a teenaged kid who was walking by. You, help me push, he told the teenager, who reluctantly agreed. You put it in neutral, Roldán shouted to me, and when I say, shift to second and try and start it up. We tried three times. The engine didn't even respond.

Oh boy, said Roldán, widening his silver smile. That battery won't go any more, mi rey. The kid, without a word, had made himself scarce.

I got out of the car. I held the pack of Camels out to Roldán and he took a cigarette and we both stood there a moment smoking in silence. The sun had come back out. In the distance a veil of warm mist covered part of the mountain. Have you got jumper cables? he asked me suddenly. I think so, I said, in the trunk. My truck only has a twenty-four volt battery. We've got to find a driver with a twelve-volt battery. Maybe we'll be able to charge it up. He asked for another cigarette. For later, he said, and put it behind his ear. So where are you coming from, then? he asked, and I explained that I'd left the capital that same morning, that I was on my way to Belize, that I wanted to cross over to Belize, that I wanted to get to the white sand beaches of Belize. Not with that battery, mi rey, he said, still smiling. But don't you worry. We'll sort it out right away. God willing.

Roldán stopped two truckers, and both of them from their cabs merely shook their heads and went on up the highway. Soon the owner of the truck that was parked next to me arrived. Roldán approached him and explained the situation and the guy said that, yes, he had a twelve-volt battery, but that he couldn't give me a charge. Why not, old man? Roldán asked, and the guy just shook his head, reluctant. But Roldán was so insistent that the driver finally agreed. We connected the two batteries. The trucker started his engine, and we let it run for a few minutes. Nothing. Then we left it running a few minutes more, and I tried again, and again, nothing. The trucker detached the cables, got up into his cab, and, almost offended by me, as though I'd stolen something from him, went on his way.

Roldán took out his cell phone and dialed a number. He asked for a tow truck. Don't worry, he told me. It's a friend's, he said, who can quickly change your battery here in Melchor de Mencos, on the other side of the bridge, and you can continue on your way to Belize.

I felt something in my knees. Maybe impotence. Maybe a devastating aloneness. Maybe the panic of being drawn in, further and further, into a grand spiderweb of swindlers.

Roldán stood smoking beside me until his friend arrived with the tow truck and he negotiated a price with him and warned him to treat me well. I thanked him. I offered him a few bills, which he stubbornly refused. I said, perhaps out of fear at finding myself alone and stranded in the middle of the Petén jungle, that he should let me buy him a beer in town. I've got to be going, too, he said, shaking his head.

I climbed into the passenger seat of the tow truck. It smelled of sweat, of grease, of rancid fish, of burned-out brakes. From the rearview mirror hung a pink plastic crucifix, a laminated postcard of a blonde showing her tits, and two furry dice, one white and the other black. I read the writing on the windshield, along the top in big gold letters: CHRIST IS MY NORTH. Don't even think about going on to Belize tonight, Roldán said, holding my door. Better to stay in town, have a tasty dinner, get a good night's sleep, and leave nice and early tomorrow morning, in no rush. I felt that same something in my knees again. We'll see, I said. I closed the door. Seriously, he shouted over the tow truck's hefty engine. It can be dangerous being out at night.

\* \* \*

It didn't look like a mechanic's workshop. There was no sign anywhere. The place was nothing more than a small lot with an earthen floor, closed in by three adobe walls, and a big gray metal gate that opened out onto the road. There were tools cast about and piled

up all over. Parked in one corner was a Mercedes-Benz from the seventies, possibly white, all rickety and rusty. Next to it, a little boy aged two or three was sitting on the floor, completely naked. He was playing with a handful of pegs and nuts. The guy with the tow truck was also the owner and the only mechanic there. He was called Nicasio. After hooking the battery up to an old machine, he confirmed that it was indeed unusable now. He told me he could get ahold of a new one, a luxury one, imported, at a very good price. He told me I should pay him half up front. He told me I should leave the keys to the car with him. He told me I should give him a few hours, that there was a diner on the corner where I could wait, have something to drink, that he'd come and fetch me there when he'd finished the work. I looked at my watch. It was already five in the afternoon. Then I looked at my friend's sapphire-colored Saab: open and weary and with its innards exposed. I took my backpack out of the trunk and headed for the gate. The naked boy watched me, spread out in a puddle of mud.

\* \* \*

I walked to a little park, on a fork in the road. There was no one there. There was no breeze, no shade, no respite. At the entrance, badly painted on a dirty-white archway, a sign bid me welcome to the town. I took the last cigarette out of the pack and sat down to smoke on a bench that was still a bit wet. Almost immediately a young man approached carrying bags full of nuts and an old set of bronze scales. Anything for you, señor? I've got peanuts, he said. I've got fava beans, cashews, macadamias, salted almonds. I bought a couple of ounces of cashews. After weighing them and taking my money, he sat down beside me. I asked him about the origin of the town's name, Melchor de Mencos. They say, he said, that it was the name of a general who defeated the British. Centuries back, he said. But who knows if that's true, he said. He looked up at the highway, as though searching for someone, or as though someone were searching for him. I also looked out toward the highway. I saw a man with dark brown skin, taking small steps forward, as though dancing forward. Then I saw a truck carrying, on its flatbed, a scraggy white cow. Then I saw three kids all on a single bicycle. And you're just passing through? the young man asked me. Something like that, I said. I finished my cigarette in silence.

\* \* \*

I walked past a girl who was slobbering red and chasing after a group of chicks. Her white dress looked like it was already stained red. Her loose white stockings looked like they were already stained red. Her headband and her black patent leather slippers had been forgotten behind her, by the open door of an evangelical church through which came the chanting of the parishioners and the preacher. The girl was holding half a pomegranate in her dark hands. Suddenly she brought the half pomegranate to her mouth and took a big bite and started to fire little red pellets at the chicks.

\* \* \*

I walked past a man leaning up against the trunk of an almond tree. He was sitting on the grass, his legs stretched out. He was, I assumed, taking advantage of the tree's shade. He was wearing black pants and a white shirt with a black tie. He had a newspaper on his lap. As I came closer, I noticed that he had a green circle on each of his temples. They were two slices of lemon, held there with a shoelace tied around his head. Little drops trickled all down his face, perhaps of lemon juice or sweat or both. Come over here gringo and let me

suck it, I thought I heard him whisper behind me, as I hurried away from the almond tree. But when I looked back the man seemed to be fast asleep.

\* \* \*

I went into a small store, in the town's bustling main road. An elderly man was leaning on the counter, barely upright, barely holding a nearly empty bottle of Quezalteca Especial aguardiente. Can I help you? said a squat lady from the other side of the grille. I walked over. I greeted her, seeing through the grille that she only sold domestic cigarettes. I asked for a pack of Rubios. The elderly man babbled something. The lady passed the pack to me through the grille, and then I passed her a few bills. The elderly man came over toward me a bit and babbled something again, holding out his hand. He smelled of urine. Don't bother the gentleman, the lady scolded him. And you just ignore him, she said to me, handing me back a few coins through the grille, which I immediately wanted to give the elderly man. But his old hand couldn't hold them and the coins fell to the floor. I crouched down to pick them up. When I stood back up, right there, beside me, was the mustached officer from immigration: still serious, still in his green khaki uniform, still with his reading glasses hanging round his neck, but now in the company of a man in cowboy boots and a cowboy hat and with huge shades and a toothpick between his teeth and a black pistol well lodged in his waistband. I wiped my forehead with the sleeve of my shirt. I went off, almost at a run, into the gloom of the main road.

\* \* \*

An enormous red macaw was perched on a broomstick, at the back of the diner. From time to time it would scratch at its chest with its beak or let out a cry or a sharp screech. Its red plumage looked opaque and sad. On each of the four tables, on a floral plastic tablecloth, there was a bottle with an atomizer. Just in case, the girl said as she seated me. It's just that it's a bit crazy, she said, looking at the enormous macaw. Sometimes it just attacks people, she said. But a spray of water will scare it off. I opened the new pack of Rubios and lit one and immediately started feeling better, getting my breath back. From the kitchen, behind a curtain of beads, I could hear the murmuring of women's voices, laughter, groans, a merengue on the radio, the clinking of plates and glasses. A couple of white lightbulbs hung from the ceiling. The macaw looked sleepily at me from its perch.

The same girl came out through the curtain of beads carrying a tray, and walked over to me. I noticed that she was barefoot. I noticed that she now had a baby tied to her back (or did she before and I didn't see it?) with a long blue sash. The baby was sleeping. Here you are, she said, and put on the table an ashtray, a bottle of Gallo beer, a small glass. I thanked her. You're welcome, she said. You don't want to eat anything? she asked me almost embarrassed, and I said that not now, but thanks, maybe later. A stray dog wanted to come into the diner but she shooed it away with a clap. Then she just stood where she was, holding the tray flat against her ample breasts, perhaps waiting for something. I asked her why it was called the Fallabón Diner. That's what they call this neighborhood, she said. Years ago, she said, Fallabón used to be its own village, right here, but now it's a part of Melchor de Mencos (I learned later that the name of the village, Fallabón, comes from a fire and explosion that had happened near there, in a timber warehouse, in 1950; it's an Anglicism, from the English words fire and boom). The baby whined and the girl reached back and stroked its cheek with a finger. And is that your car, in Don Nica's workshop? It



is, I said, reluctant to explain to her that it wasn't really my car but a friend's. She clicked her tongue as if to say good luck, or as if to say what a shame. I asked her if she could recommend a hotel, that I'd maybe have to spend the night, and she thought a moment and then told me that the La Cabaña Hotel was good, that it was close by, on the main road. There's even a pool, she said. La Cabaña Hotel, I repeated, so as not to forget, and wiping the sweat from my forehead with a paper napkin I thought I saw something small and dark climbing the back wall. Perhaps a spider. Perhaps a horsefly. Perhaps a scorpion. And is it yours, the macaw? I asked the girl. She smiled. It belongs to this place, she said, but I didn't understand whether that was the restaurant or the neighborhood or the whole town. Does it have a name? Sure does, she said. It's called Gómez, she said. The macaw screamed something, perhaps because it had heard its name and wanted to join in the conversation. I stubbed my cigarette out in the ashtray. Is it a male? I asked the girl and she just gave a laugh and shrugged and said probably, nobody really knows. I noticed that the floor tiles under the macaw were covered in white and grey droppings. Excuse me, whispered the girl, and went back into the kitchen.

I poured myself a swig of beer with plenty of foam. The beer was warm but it went down well. I poured myself another swig. I lit a cigarette and took a deep breath. I moved the bottle of water closer, just in case the macaw decided to come down off the broomstick. I opened my backpack and was about to take out a book to read for a bit when I felt the presence of somebody standing behind me.

Bring us two beers, kid, called the immigration officer.

\* \* \*

They both greeted me, sternly, with just a glance, and positioned themselves at a table in front of me. The girl came out through the curtain of beads. She was carrying a bottle of beer in each hand. The baby was still sleeping, tied to her back. Here you are, Don Francisco, she said. The officer muttered something, perhaps thanking her. He had taken a red handkerchief out of the pocket of his green khaki uniform. He finished wiping the sweat from his neck and his face. Then he took a long sip of beer and wiped his lips and his grayish mustache with the red handkerchief. The other man reached out and grabbed the girl's forearm hard and pulled her over toward him until she was sitting on his lap. Do you have pork carnitas? he asked her in a lecherous whisper, his long-nailed hand holding her neck, like a hook. His voice sounded too feminine to me. We do, she said, never looking up from the floor. The baby on her back stirred, whined. And do you have cracklings? That too, she said, her voice muted, her gaze still fixed on the floor. Well then, go bring us a portion of carnitas and another of cracklings, he said, and gave her a shove toward the kitchen. She tottered a little. Right away, she said, recovering her balance. The man took off his shades and his cowboy hat and took out the black pistol and put it all down on the table. Still chewing on the toothpick, he raised his right hand as though he were swearing an oath before a judge. And if that fucking bird comes anywhere near me, he said, I swear to God I'll put a couple of bullets in him.

Both men laughed loudly, almost cackling, perhaps looking at me. The girl slipped away, quickly, head down, the baby swaying on her back.

I wanted to smoke. I noticed the cigarette I was holding in my fingers was shaking slightly. I couldn't stop looking at that dirty hand in the air, and as I still looked at it I suddenly thought of the heart attack that my Polish grandfather had suffered at the end of the seventies. I was very young at the time, but I can still remember my mother's

uncontrollable weeping when she got the call from the hospital. My grandfather was lucky. It was a minor heart attack. He recovered quickly. But as a result, and following the three instructions he received from his doctor: he quit smoking tobacco, he started drinking a couple of ounces of whisky daily (for his nerves, he used to say), and he got into the habit of walking. He walked a lot, every morning, as exercise. He would leave the house very early and walk around his neighborhood. Sometimes for up to two hours. Sometimes I'd go with him. And during one of those walks, while he was alone at the end of the Avenue of the Americas, right by the statue of Pope John Paul II, a motorcycle with two guys on it stopped beside him. They'd knocked him to the ground, he had said, outraged. They'd given him a blow to the head, he had said, showing us where. They'd wanted to kidnap him, he had said, perhaps now exaggerating what was a simple robbery. They'd taken everything he had, he had said, now indignant, or almost everything, now proud. He'd managed to keep, he had said, the ring with the black stone that he wore on his right little finger. Sometimes he told us he had pleaded with them till they let him keep his ring. Sometimes he told us he had struggled with them to keep his ring. Sometimes he told us he had fought with them to keep his ring. Which version he told depended on the passing of the years, or on his nostalgia, or on his mood, or on the character of the person who was asking him (my grandfather understood, maybe at an intuitive level, that a story grows, changes its skin, does acrobatics on the tightrope of time; he understood that a story is really many stories). He had bought that ring in '45, he liked to tell us, in New York, the first stop on his journey to Guatemala after being freed from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. In New York, at a Jewish jeweler's in Harlem, he had paid forty dollars for it. And he had worn it the rest of his life, for the next sixty years, on his right little finger, by way of mourning for his parents and siblings and friends and all the others exterminated by the Nazis in the ghettos and the concentration camps. A few years back, when my grandfather died, that ring was left to one of my mother's brothers, who wept when he inherited it and decided to keep it in the safe in his office. It was just any old black stone, in any old gold setting. But one night someone got into that office and managed to open the safe and stole everything that was inside, including my grandfather's ring with the black stone.

And there before me, on the little finger of that dirty hand that was now holding a tortilla filled with pork and cracklings, I kept on looking at a ring very much like my grandfather's ring. Or perhaps it was exactly the same as my grandfather's ring. Perhaps it was exactly the same black stone, and exactly the same setting in gold metal, and it was exactly the same shape and size. Or at least it was all exactly like the ring in my memory, the ring as I recalled it or as I wanted to recall it, on my grandfather's pale and slightly crooked right little finger. And although I knew it was impossible, even preposterous, even absurd, I couldn't help imagining that this ring, on this greasy hand, was indeed my grandfather's ring with the black stone. Not a similar one. Not an exact one. But the same one. The one my grandfather had bought in New York, in Harlem, in '45. The one he had worn for the rest of his life on his right little finger. The one he had managed to save after convincing or compelling, at the end of the Avenue of the Americas, at the end of the seventies, some muggers or maybe kidnapers. The one that when he died was inherited by one of my mother's brothers. The one that had been stolen from a safe, one night, by a thief who never knew what he was stealing; by a thief who never knew that in that insignificant and somber black stone one could still see the perfect reflections of my grandfather's exterminated parents (Samuel and Masha), and the faces of my grandfather's exterminated

sisters (Ula and Rushka), and the face of my grandfather's exterminated brother (Zalman), and the faces of so many exterminated men and exterminated women and exterminated boys and exterminated girls and exterminated babies who were killed as they slept in the arms of their mothers, as they dreamed in the gas chambers; by a thief who never knew that in that small black stone it was still possible to hear the murmur of all these voices, of so many voices, intoning in chorus the prayer for the dead.

The macaw gave a shriek and stretched out its wings and still on its perch started to beat them energetically, desperately, as if wanting to fly.

### TEXT 3

**“Confesión” by Care Santos**

**Published in *Words Without Borders*, December 2012**

Lo confieso: una vez maté a un periodista.

He tratado de olvidarlo, callar, fingir, pero ya no tiene sentido continuar engañándome a mí misma. Nadie puede escapar de su memoria.

El recuerdo de aquel infeliz me persigue, de día y de noche. Y cuando digo que me persigue me refiero exactamente a eso: cuando abro los ojos de madrugada, asustada por alguna presencia que no reconozco como real, encuentro a mi lado a aquel bobo, observándome con los ojos saltones que ya tenía en vida, formulándome preguntas de pesadilla. No puedo soportarlo más. Tal vez a alguien pueda resultar sorprendente el lugar que he elegido para esta confesión. Quienes alguna vez me habéis acusado de meliflua o sinsustancia tendréis por fin vuestro merecido. Yo opino que en realidad nada de eso importa mucho: las historias existen, con indiferencia de lo que aportemos a ellas. Y los lugares, como los sucesos, te escogen para que los cargues de sentido.

En fin, no quiero irme por las ramas. En mi descargo debo decir que no se trataba de uno de esos periodistas curtidos, que siempre descubrimos afilando la palabra justa o husmeando allí donde ocurren cosas que *de verdad* nos interesan. No. Aquél pertenecía a la clase prescindible de los informadores culturales, uno de esos especialistas en el refrito de las notas de prensa, en la distorsión de las declaraciones y en la copia salvaje del artículo anterior, pescado en Internet, y siempre firmado por alguien más brillante. Además, técnicamente ni siquiera era periodista titular. Apenas becario, uno de esos recién llegados a una sección de Cultura desde el útero de la Universidad de Ciencias de la Información — ¡ja!, ¿ciencias?; ¡ja!, ¿información?— que aún confunden el horóscopo con la crítica de arte. Y lo peor: no porque sean inexpertos, sino porque nunca, en toda su puta vida, tendrán la capacidad suficiente para discernir del todo una cosa de la otra.

Además, pertenecía a esa subclase de entrevistadores que jamás graba conversación alguna, sino que toma notas. Suelen sentarse frente a ti enarbolando un cuaderno cuadriculado y un bolígrafo de plástico, lanzan una pregunta como quien arroja una piedra a un pozo y pasan el resto del tiempo garabateando a toda prisa en su cuaderno, con el ceño fruncido y sin mirarte a la cara ni una sola vez. A veces imploran:

—¿Podrías hablar un poco más despacio, por favor?

Cuando eso ocurre, yo me esfuerzo por expresarme lo más rápido posible. Tengo comprobado que da igual la cantidad de palabras tuyas que sean capaces de retener al vuelo mientras tú te esfuerzas en razonar. No importa qué digas, porque ellos interpretarán lo que les plazca y, lo que es peor, le darán a tu discurso la forma del de ellos. De modo que al día



siguiente, todos los lectores de las páginas de Cultura de su diario se preguntarán cómo una idiota como tú, que apenas sabe conjugar y que desconoce los secretos de la concordancia entre sujeto y verbo, puede haber tenido el atrevimiento de publicar un libro.

Los aficionados a los detalles morbosos os estaréis preguntando qué método utilicé. Sobra decir que nunca lo había hecho antes, de modo que tuve que pensarlo, aunque fuera durante tres centésimas de segundo. Podría haber lanzado contra su cabeza el cenicero de cristal que reposaba sobre la mesa que nos separaba, o podría haberle rebanado el pescuezo con el vaso de tubo de la tónica con hielo que estaba tomando. Salvo estas armas, no tenía a mano ninguna otra, de modo que me decanté por lo de toda la vida, que siempre da buenos resultados: le agarré por el pescuezo y se lo retorcí hasta que exhaló su último aliento. Así, sin más, aprovechando la ventaja que me daba su desconcierto (¿qué periodista podría prever que su entrevistado se comporte de ese modo?) y su menguado tamaño (no debía de pesar más de cincuenta quilos ni medía más de un metro sesenta).

En rigor a la verdad, debo reconocer que no me resultó tan fácil como yo creía. Pataleó, se retorció, intentó arañarme con sus uñas mordisqueadas, trató de defenderse arrojándome la grabadora (que no había conectado para no tener que perder su precioso tiempo escuchando la grabación), hizo volar por los aires uno de sus mocasines y hasta trató de agredirme con el bolígrafo de plástico, pero nada de aquello le valió de mucho. Apreté, y apreté y apreté, hasta que vi asomar a sus mejillas un rubor intenso y me di cuenta de que su lengua caía, flácida, entre sus fauces. Entonces le solté. Cayó con un plof sordo sobre la mullida alfombra. Miré a ambos lados. Estaba sola en aquel rincón de la cafetería. Dejé cinco euros por las consumiciones y salí del lugar, ajustándome la bufanda de lana.

Está bien, lo acepto, fui algo tosca. La ofuscación es lo que tiene. Procedía con la misma vehemencia con que ahora estoy aporreando el teclado para vomitar esta confesión destemplada que durante todo este tiempo ha ardido en mi memoria. No me explico cómo he podido esperar tanto, y sin volverme loca. Ocho años y medio. Ese es el tiempo que hace que abandoné el enclenque cadáver del becario sobre la alfombra de color sangre del Gran Hotel España, de Oviedo, y salí a callejear, a recobrar una ciudad que siempre me pareció hermosa y que toda aquella pamplina de la promoción me había obligado a ignorar.

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Es paradójico, pero no sé apenas nada de la vida de aquel infeliz, salvo que yo le puse fin. Meses después de aquella tarde en que llovía sobre Oviedo, supe que tenía una novia, que luego resultaron ser dos (no hay amores excluyentes). El jefe de sección de su periódico le consideraba un idiota, lo cual en algún momento me ayudó a tranquilizar mi conciencia («un idiota menos en el mundo —pensé— deberían darme un premio por esto, y no por escribir novelas»); con su padre mantenía una relación cercana a la antropofagia (la madre había muerto cuando él era un chaval).

Su nombre fue lo único que tuve claro desde el principio, aunque me lo reservaré no por respeto (sería ridículo, a estas alturas) sino por pudor. Digamos que se llamaba M. M., por si a alguien le sirve de algo saberlo (y perdón a todos aquellos que, lo sé, odiáis los personajes que se nombran sólo con iniciales, espero que en este caso sepáis comprender que no puedo hacer otra cosa). Gracias a que supe su nombre desde el principio pude llevar a cabo las pesquisas necesarias para saber cuanto acabo de constatar (una de las dos novias tenía una bitácora en Internet donde le gustaba explicar todas sus nimiedades, la mayoría de las cuales le afectaban también a él).

Acerca de lo que hice después del asesinato, no sabría precisarlo. Ya he dicho que me lancé a callejear por los alrededores de la catedral, muy contenta y mucho más tranquila de lo que había estado en las últimas semanas, desde que comenzó la promoción. Entré a echar un vistazo a los anaqueles de la librería Cervantes y hasta me encontré con mi amiga Concha Quirós. De inmediato pensé que me notaría algo raro en la mirada, un temblor o una palidez delatoras, no sé, ese tipo de cosas que en las novelas negras siempre constituyen una pista definitiva para resolver el caso. Para mi sorpresa, no ocurrió nada especial. Mantuvimos una conversación distendida y agradable acerca de su maravillosa librería y de mis deseos de dejar de viajar y regresar a casa, donde podría seguir escribiendo con esa tranquilidad que he tenido que aprender a guardar de los depredadores.

Concha estuvo de acuerdo conmigo.

—Créeme que os compadezco —dijo— tantas ciudades y tantas personas distintas y vosotros explicando siempre lo mismo... es como un castigo divino.

Qué acertada está siempre Concha Quirós, pensé. Y qué bonito nombre el de esta mujer: Concha, Quirós. Dos palabras que da gusto pronunciar. Como «pulpa», como «tántalo», como «plantígrado».

Ella fue lo único bueno que me pasó esa tarde. Cuando declaró a la policía, Concha Quirós dijo que no me había notado nada raro. Nunca supe si lo hizo por protegerme o porque realmente había conseguido engañarla. Aprovecho esta ocasión para agradecersele, ya que no pude hacerlo en persona, como habría deseado.

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Una vez, cuando yo misma trabajaba en la sección de «Cultura y espectáculos» de un rotativo con mucho más pasado que futuro, me enviaron a entrevistar a Mariano Antolín Rato. Había escrito una novela llamada *Abril Blues* en cuyas páginas la capital era un lugar con catedral —en aquellos tiempos la Almudena seguía en obras perpetuas— y hermosas playas de arena blanca y fina. La había publicado Anagrama y Antolín Rato recibía a los periodistas en la editorial, de la que guardo un vago recuerdo de cuartos repletos de papel, moquetas polvorientas y sofás de polipiel (aunque, ahora que lo pienso, es posible que los sofás fueran auténticos).

Yo tenía entonces dieciocho años y una vida muy ajetreada. Por las mañanas estudiaba Derecho y por las tardes me las daba de periodista. Debí de ser la redactora en plantilla más joven de toda Barcelona. Casi todos los días salía de trabajar pasadas las once y cogía un taxi —con cargo al periódico— que me llevaba hasta mi casa, a treinta kilómetros. Al día siguiente me levantaba a las seis para llegar a la Universidad a las ocho de la mañana, a tiempo de conseguir un asiento en las demasiado concurridas aulas de los primeros cursos de carrera.

De todo esto, claro, Antolín Rato no sabía nada. Tal vez de haberlo sabido habría actuado de otro modo. El caso es que yo me planté frente a él con su libro y un cuaderno en la mano y espeté aquella frase-lugar común entre los habitantes del azaroso universo del periodismo cultural:

—Lo lamento mucho, pero me han dado su libro hoy mismo y no he tenido tiempo de leerlo.

Mariano Antolín Rato, a quien recuerdo con un bigote grisáceo al estilo de Pablo Abraira, me miró sin perder la calma y replicó:

—No te preocupes. No tengo prisa. Ahí tienes un sofá muy cómodo —señaló el único que había—, donde puedes instalarte a leer. Cuando termines, charlaremos de lo que quieras.

No me atreví a replicar. Leí el libro de cabo a rabo sentada en el sofá de Herralde que, para colmo, estaba en el recibidor, de modo que frente a mí desfilaron uno por uno los tres o cuatro colegas que estaban citados después que yo. Cuando terminé, me confesé preparada para realizar mi trabajo. Antolín Rato me atendió con la amabilidad que merecía alguien bien preparado, y todo acabó mucho mejor de lo que había empezado.

Por lo que a mí respecta, aprendí una lección elemental: nunca te atrevas a decirle a un escritor que sólo has podido ojear su libro. Un escritor es alguien obsesionado hasta la enfermedad con ese trabajo que tú sólo has ojeado; es alguien que ha invertido veinte años de su vida en algo a lo que tú ni siquiera estás dispuesto a sacrificarle un par de horas. Y, lo que es peor, ni siquiera estás dispuesto a mentirle para fingir que lo has leído y —lo que sería deseable— que te ha fascinado. Permite que te dé un consejo: si alguna vez entrevistas a un escritor sin haber leído su libro, procura que no se note.

Conste que no digo todo esto por la novela de Antolín Rato. *Abril Blues*, contra todo propósito, me gustó. No será por las agradables circunstancias en que la leí, ciertamente. Moraleja: Como se sabe desde antiguo, se aprende a ser fraile ejerciendo de monaguillo.

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Aquella madrugada asturiana, en la 307 del Gran Hotel Regente tuve el primer contacto con el fantasma del bobo a quien había asesinado. He aquí un axioma infalible: si alguien ha sido idiota en vida, sigue siéndolo después de muerto. Aquel lamentable individuo estaba condenado, por mi culpa, a ser becario desaliñado y memo para el resto de la eternidad. Del mismo modo, yo lo estaba a soportar la venganza de su espíritu y resistir sus envites durante el resto de mi existencia.

Comenzó por algo sencillo: se sentó en la cama, a mi lado, y formuló durante toda la noche la misma pregunta. Era la pregunta que me había decidido por fin a lanzarme a su cuello, después de algunas vacilaciones. Se comprendía que, ya que había muerto con ella en los labios, se convirtiera en algo que no podía dejar en tierra al partir hacia una vida ultraterrena. La había traído consigo y la blandía con la persistencia de un tábano. Lo hizo mil cuatrocientas once veces. ¿Lo sé por algún motivo en concreto? Por supuesto. Las conté. En algo tenía que entretenerme, mientras el bobo muerto me miraba de hito en hito y me acribillaba con su curiosidad que ya nunca se saciaría.

Serían las cuatro de la madrugada cuando cambió de registro y soltó la frase que ya no habría de dejar de repetir hasta el amanecer:

—¿Qué piensas de la literatura femenina? ¿Qué piensas de la literatura femenina? ¿Qué piensas de la literatura femenina? ¿Qué piensas de la literatura femenina? ¿Qué piensas de la literatura femenina? ¿Qué piensas de la literatura femenina? ¿Qué piensas de la literatura femenina?

Qué sádico castigo.

Desde entonces, mi vida se convirtió en un infierno. No porque di con mis huesos en la cárcel, después de una investigación policial corta y un juicio bastante largo que llevó a la depresión a mi abogado defensor (aunque después de conseguir una pena bastante rebajada alegando enajenación mental transitoria y, qué cosas, arrepentimiento). No, no, todo lo contrario, mi reclusión es un gusto: por fin encontré una excusa convincente para decir que no a todos mis compromisos y dejé de asistir a mesas redondas, reuniones de

jurados, charlas en centros de secundaria y fiestas literarias organizadas en loor ajeno, que tanto tiempo me robaban. En la cárcel de Wad-Ras, además, me siento comprendida y bien tratada, imparto talleres literarios a una docena de entusiastas alumnas y tengo más tiempo que nunca para escribir. Además, recibo visitas, disfruto de algún que otro bis a bis y de permisos de fin de semana (esto último, sólo desde hace un par de meses).

El problema es otro. El problema es que no importa lo que me ocurra de día, a qué personas conozca, qué lugares pise por primera —o por última— vez. No importan las pequeñas o grandes banalidades con que se alinea la cotidianeidad de la única escritora viva condenada por homicidio, porque por las noches vuelvo a toparme con el espíritu vengativo y tenaz del becario. Recuerden que les dije que le maté hace ocho años y medio. Lo cual eleva a tres mil ciento dos las noches que he pasado ya en su nada deseable compañía. Comprenderán que no haya podido descansar, olvidar, reponerme. Y mucho menos encontrar pareja. Fundar una familia es para mí una empresa impensable.

Tenía un marido cuando todo ocurrió —como algunos recordarán— pero me dejó poco después de mi condena, incapaz de comprender y ni siquiera de preguntar. Desde que disfruto de dos noches a la semana fuera de estas paredes, no es fácil encontrar a alguien dispuesto a departir noche tras noche con el memo, que inexplicablemente tiene la costumbre de acribillar a preguntas también a mis amantes. Eso ha hecho, por lo menos, con los (pocos) compañeros de cama que he tenido. Compadecí a uno en concreto, que se levantó a mear en mitad de la noche y regresó preguntándome por qué un señor muy raro y ojeroso que estaba en mitad del pasillo acababa de preguntarle su opinión acerca del panorama actual de la narrativa española. Por la mañana el fantasma ya no estaba en el pasillo, pero el amante tampoco estaba en mi cama.

No creo que sea difícil comprender que entre lo que les cuento y la locura sólo media un poco de tiempo. Y, como sabrán aquellos que alguna vez hayan tenido contacto con presencias espectrales, los seres de la otra vida tienen una paciencia infinita. Será porque allí donde viven el reloj ya no importa mucho. El caso es que pueden permitirse una tenacidad a prueba de calendarios. Siempre se salen con la suya. La constancia todo lo consigue, siempre que se lleve al extremo necesario, parecen querer enseñarnos.

Pues bien. Heme aquí, convertida en el despojo de lo que fui. Narradora premiada e histérica. Esté donde esté —mi querida celda de Wad-Ras, hotel, domicilio, camping o casa de amigo— siempre comparto tálamo con el periodista de *La Nueva España* que jamás terminó de entrevistarme. Y siempre, a eso de las cuatro o las cinco de la mañana, cuando he conseguido por fin dormirme y olvidar su presencia, cuando me hallo sumergida en un sueño feliz donde tengo marido, tres hijos y una casa con perro, alfombra y secadora, en ese momento el muy sádico me zarandea con sus manos inertes, agarrándome sin piedad por los hombros, me obliga a enfrentar mi somnolencia con sus pupilas saltonas y espeta aquello que lleva espetándome tres mil ciento dos noches, sin una sola falta, con urgencia de ahogado y estupidez incurable, desde que lo maté por hacerlo:

—¿Tú eres Ángela Vallvey, verdad? ¿Te importaría deletrearme tu apellido?

#### TEXT 4

**“Confession” by Care Santos, translated by Megan Berkobein  
Published in *Words Without Borders*, December 2012**

I admit it: I once killed a journalist.

I've tried to forget it, to keep quiet, to pretend, but it doesn't make sense to continue deceiving myself. No one can escape their memories.

The recollection of that unlucky wretch follows me, by day and by night. And when I say that it pursues me, I mean exactly that: when I open my eyes at dawn, frightened by some presence that I don't recognize as real, I find that fool by my side, watching me with those bulging eyes, devising nightmarish questions for me. I can't take it anymore. Perhaps the place I've chosen for this confession might prove surprising to some. Those who have at one time or another accused me of foolishness, of being a trivial and frivolous person, will feel justified at last. I believe that none of that really matters much now; the stories exist, independent of what we contribute to them. And the places—like the events—choose you, so that you can better fill them with meaning.

Anyway, I don't want to beat around the bush. In my defense, I should say that we aren't dealing with one of those hardened journalists, someone who is always found searching for the right word or sniffing around where the things that *actually* interest us happen. No. This reporter belonged to an expendable class of cultural journalists, one of those specialists dealing in rehashed press notes, in the distortion of statements and in the savage copying of previous articles, fished from the Internet and always penned by someone more brilliant. Moreover, he wasn't technically a headline journalist. Merely an intern, he was one of those recent arrivals to the Culture section from the womb of the School of Information Sciences—Ha! Sciences?; Ha! Information?—who still confuse horoscopes with art criticism. And what's worse: not because they are inexperienced, but rather because they will never, in their fucking lives, have the mental capacity to tell one thing from the other.

What's more, he belonged to that subclass of interviewers who never record a conversation, taking notes instead. They usually seat themselves across from you brandishing a square notebook and a plastic pen, firing off questions like someone hurling stones into a well and spending the rest of the time scribbling at full speed in their notepad, frowning and without looking you in the eyes even once. Sometimes they implore:

“Could you speak a bit slower, please?”

When that happens, I make an effort to express myself as quickly as possible. It has been proven that the amount of your words that they are able to retain on the fly while you make an effort to propose a rational argument really makes no difference. It doesn't matter what you say, because they will interpret it as they please, and what's worse, they will shape your speech like they would their own. Then, the next day, all the readers leafing through the newspaper will be thinking to themselves what an idiot you are, and how, if she hardly knows how to conjugate and that the secrets of the agreement between subject and verb remain unknown to her, could she have the nerve to publish a book?

Aficionados of morbid details, you will be asking yourselves what method I used. Needless to say, I had never done it before, so I had to think about it beforehand, although that lasted all of three-hundredths of a second. I could have smashed the glass ashtray that rested on the table between us against his head, I could have slit his throat with the glass that he was drinking tonic out of. Save for those weapons, I had nothing else at hand, and so I opted for the old standby, which always provides good results: I grabbed hold of him by the neck and I twisted until he exhaled his last breath. It happened just like that, without further ado, as I took advantage of his confusion (what journalist could foresee that his interviewee would behave that way?) and his smallish stature (he couldn't have weighed more than 155 pounds or stood more than five feet four inches).



Strictly speaking, I should admit that it wasn't as easy as I had believed it would be. He kicked his legs up, writhed in pain, tried to scratch me with his chewed fingernails, tried to defend himself by throwing the tape recorder at me (the one he had not connected so that he wouldn't waste his precious time having to listen to the recording), he launched one of his moccasins in the air, and even tried to attack me with the plastic pen, but none of that mattered much. I squeezed and squeezed and squeezed, until I saw an intense flush come over his cheeks and I realized that his tongue had started to droop, flaccid, between his jaws. Then I threw him down. He fell with a muffled plop against the soft rug. I looked to my left and right; I was alone in that corner of the café. I put down five euros for the drinks and left the place, adjusting my woolen scarf around my neck.

It's fine, I agree—I was somewhat brusque. It had everything to do with blind rage. I proceeded with the same vehemence with which I find myself now hammering down on this keyboard, in an effort to expel this out-of-sorts confession that has burned in my memory all this time. I can't understand how I could have waited so long, and without going crazy at that. Eight and a half years. That much time has passed since I abandoned the intern's sickly cadaver on the blood-colored rug in the Gran Hotel España in Oviedo, and I left to walk the streets, to recapture the city that had always seemed beautiful and that all the nonsense about the book tour had forced me to forget.

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It's paradoxical, but I know virtually nothing about the life of that unfortunate man, except that I ended it. Months after that evening when the rain fell over Oviedo, I learned that he had a girlfriend, which then turned out to be two (exclusive loves don't exist). His editor thought him an idiot, which helped ease my conscience at the time (“One less idiot in the world,” I thought, “they should give me an award for this, and not for writing novels”); he maintained an unnaturally close relationship with his father (his mother had died when he was just a boy).

His name was the only thing that was clear to me from the start, although I won't say it here—not out of respect (that would be ridiculous, at this point) but rather out of decency. We'll call him M.M. (and beg pardon of all of you who, I know, hate characters known only by their initials; I hope that in this case you can understand there's no other option). Thanks to the fact that I knew his name from the very beginning, I could carry out the necessary inquiries in order to know how much I had verified (one of his two girlfriends had a blog where she liked to explain all her trivial observations, the majority of which also concerned him as well).

As for what I did after the murder, I wouldn't know how to put it into words. I've already said that I took to walking the streets skirting the cathedral, quite happy and much calmer than I had been in weeks, since the book tour had begun. I entered *la librería Cervantes* to browse the shelves when I happened upon my friend Concha Quirós. Straightaway I thought that she might notice something strange in my appearance, a tell-tale trembling or pallor, I don't know, the type of thing that in detective novels always represents the definitive clue to solving the case. To my surprise, nothing special happened. We had a conversation about the marvelous bookstore and about my desire to quit traveling and return home, where I would be able to continue writing at my own leisure, with a certain calmness that I had needed to learn to hide away from predators. Concha agreed with me.

“Believe me, I pity all of you,” she said. “So many cities and so many different people, with you all having to explain the same thing again and again...it’s like a divine punishment.”

How correct Concha Quirós always was, I thought. And how beautiful the name of this woman; Concha, Quirós. Two words that are a pleasure to pronounce. Like *pul-pa*, like *tán-talo*, like *plantí-grado*.

She was the only good thing that happened to me that evening. When she gave her statement to the police, Concha Quirós said that she hadn’t noticed anything strange about me. I never knew if she did it to protect me or because I had really managed to deceive her. I’d like to take advantage of this occasion to thank her for it, as I couldn’t do in person like I would have wished.

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That Asturian dawn, in room 307 of the Gran Hotel Regente, I had my first contact with the ghost of the dimwit who I had killed. Behold an infallible axiom: if someone was an idiot in life, he will continue to be one after death. That pitiful individual was condemned, by my hand, to being a scruffy intern and pea-brain for all eternity. Similarly, I had to put up with his vengeful spirit and to resist his nudges during the rest of my human existence.

It started with something simple: he sat himself down on the bed, at my side, and asked the same question all night. It was the question that had made me decide to throw myself at his neck, after vacillating some. It’s understandable that, as he had died with that question lodged between his lips, it became something that he couldn’t leave on Earth as he departed for the afterlife. He had carried it with him and repeated it with the persistence of a horsefly. He had done it one thousand four hundred eleven other times. Do I know this for some concrete reason? Of course—I have counted them. I had to entertain myself somehow, while that dead dimwit stared at me, and bombarded me with a curiosity never to be satiated again.

It would be four in the morning when he shifted gears and let out the sentence that he wouldn’t stop repeating until dawn:

“What do you think about Women’s writing? What do you think about Women’s writing? What do you think about Women’s writing? What do you think about Women’s writing? What do you think about Women’s writing?”

What a sadistic punishment.

From then on, my life turned into hell on earth. Not because I found my bones in prison, after a rather short police investigation and an extensive trial that brought my defense lawyer to the brink of depression (although only after negotiating a drastically reduced sentence on the grounds of temporary insanity, and, among other things, contrition). No, no, just the opposite, my imprisonment is a pleasure: I have finally found a convincing excuse to say “no” to all of my obligations and I have stopped judging panels, attending literary roundtables, talks in secondary schools, and literary festivities organized in praise of others, all of which had robbed me of my free time in the past. In the Wad-Ras prison, moreover, I feel understood and well-treated; I teach literary workshops to a dozen enthusiastic students and I have more time than ever to write. Moreover, I receive company, enjoying the odd conjugal visit, with permission to leave on the weekend (this privilege, only for the past two months).

The problem is something else. The problem is that it doesn't matter what happens during the day, which people I meet, which places I set foot in for the first—or last—time. The small or large banalities that season the day-to-day life of the only living woman author imprisoned for homicide don't matter much, because at night I keep bumping into the intern's vengeful and stubborn spirit. Keep in mind that I killed him eight and a half years ago. Which brings the count to three thousand one hundred and two nights that I've spent in his less-than-desirable company. One can understand that I haven't been able to rest, to forget, to recover. Let alone find a partner. Starting a family is an unthinkable undertaking for me.

I had a husband when all of this happened—as some might remember—but he left me a while after I was sentenced, unable to understand nor able to ask questions. Since I only enjoy two nights a week outside these walls, it's not easy to find someone willing to converse night after night with the idiot, who inexplicably has the habit of firing off questions at my lovers as well. This has happened, at least, with the few men who have shared my bed so far. I feel sorry for one in particular, who got up to take a piss in the middle of the night and returned asking me why there was a strange gentleman with rings under his eyes in the middle of the corridor, who just finished asking him his opinion about the outlook of contemporary Spanish fiction. By morning the ghost was no longer in the corridor, though the lover wasn't in my bed either.

I think you can see that there's very little time left between now and my descent into madness. And, as those who have had contact with ghostly presences know, the beings of the afterlife have infinite patience. It's because clocks don't matter much there where they live. The case is that they can permit themselves a calendar-proof tenacity. They always go out with their own. Perseverance eventually conquers all—as long as it's taken to the necessary extreme—they seem to want to teach us.

Well, anyway. Here I am, a shell of my former self. Award-winning novelist and madwoman. Wherever I am—be it my dear cell in Wad-Ras prison, hotel, home, camping, or a friend's house—I will always share my bed with the journalist from *La Nueva España* who never stopped interviewing me. What's more, he's always doing so at four or five in the morning, when I have finally managed to get to sleep and forget his presence, when I am immersed in a happy dream where I have a husband, three children, and a house with a dog, rug, and dryer, in that moment the sadistic man shakes me with his lifeless hands, grabbing me by the shoulders mercilessly, forcing me to face my sleeplessness with his bulging eyes and the spit that he has been spitting out for three thousand one hundred two nights, only missing one, with the urgency of a drowned man and his incurable stupidity, so much so that I killed him for it:

“You're Ángela Vallvey, right? Would you mind spelling your last name for me?”

## TEXT 5

“Limonos amargos” by César Antonio Molino

Published in *Words Without Borders*, March 2013

Todo fue bien hasta que llegamos a Corfú. No es que empezaran allí a ir mal las cosas, sino que la felicidad ya se prolongaba demasiado. Era un profesor novato. Al terminar mi primer curso de enseñante me compré un coche: un 127 blanco. Mi intención era viajar ese verano por Grecia recorriendo aquellos lugares históricos y literarios con los



que había soñado desde la infancia. Ni económica ni físicamente podía hacerlo solo y todas las promesas de compañía que me fueron hechas se vinieron abajo. El tiempo apremiaba y se me ocurrió poner un anuncio en el recinto de la Facultad. Una llamada me confirmó el interés de dos alumnas. Lo habían sido más y aquel curso no tenía nada pendiente con ellas. Con Maite y con Victoria, con quienes apenas me separaban unos pocos años de diferencia, emprendí pues la marcha. Al principio se me hizo raro viajar con unas chicas con las que había mantenido cierto grado de distancia profesional, pero su buen carácter y su humor nos acercaron muy pronto. Todos conducíamos, a todos nos gustaban los monumentos y ruinas, la camaradería y el servicio mutuo aminoraban el calor y el cansancio. Atravesamos el sur de Francia, y luego Italia, y ya íbamos en el ferry de Brindisi a Corfú para luego pasar al continente. Avisé de la llegada al puerto, y a la vista de los edificios que allí nos recibían no noté diferencia en el cambio de país. Construcciones pomposas musolinianas daban paso a edificios y plazas importadas de las antiguas metrópolis francesa e inglesa, en el centro histórico de la capital. Era de madrugada, teníamos todo el día por delante y decidimos buscar un lugar más rústico y marino alejado del bullicio de la ciudad. Las señales de tráfico nos llevaron al noroeste de la isla. Íbamos por la carretera de la costa. Pasamos por Alikes, Kondokali y las majestuosas ruinas de las antiguas atarazanas venecianas de Gouvia; luego Komeno, Dafnila y, finalmente, Dassia que tenía una playa inmensa de casi quince kilómetros. Algunos huertos bajaban a las arenas blanquísimas. Allí, en el mar Jónico, pudimos darnos nuestro primer baño helénico. Yo me eché a la sombra de unos olivos, y al despertar vi a Victoria todavía flotando sobre las aguas, y a Maite que regresaba, no sé de dónde, gesticulando con una señora de edad, toda vestida de negro. Había encontrado, allí mismo, un alojamiento. Era una antigua cuadra ahora toscamente reformada. Tenía tres camastros, una mesa de comedor y un pequeño hornillo, todo en un mismo espacio diáfano. Fuera estaban el w.c. y un pilón que servía como baño y ducha sin agua caliente. El precio era asequible y nos pareció bien este pequeño cuartel donde tomar nuevas fuerzas para el asalto a la Grecia continental. La casa y los huertos de la dueña se encontraban muy próximos, y la mujer nos surtía de frutas y verduras. Todo era perfecto, hasta en la íntima castidad que practicábamos. El tiempo pasaba lento y yo me dejaba perder en el porqué de las cosas terrenas, mientras ellas se iban convirtiendo en mujeres salobres, enyodadas y de ojos acuáticos, de cabelleras de alga que repasaban unas redes colgadas de los techos como velos nupciales. Desde nuestro campamento subimos hasta el norte de la isla, a Kassiopi, donde Tiberio construyó otra de sus mansiones; y también bajamos hacia el sur. En Gastouri se encontraba el Achilleion, la quinta edificada por Sissí, la emperatriz melancólica, en honor de Tetis y de Aquiles. Una construcción neoclásica, con bellísimos jardines presididos por las estatuas del héroe triunfante y herido de muerte en el talón. En Kerkyra pasábamos muchas tardes en las terrazas de la plaza de la Arcada, que nos recordaba la de la Rue Rivoli de París. Mientras ellas recorrían parsimoniosamente las estrechas calles repletas de escaparates llamativos, yo visitaba el frontispicio de Medusa, la que embelesaba mortalmente. Su sonrisa demente, sus ojos saltones, las ensortijadas serpientes de sus cabellos y de su cintura, su boca inmensa de la que debió salir una lengua ancha y bífida como la de una víbora, me petrificaban. Me sentía bien en la isla de los feacios, donde Nausicaa encontró perdido a Ulises, pero los días propuestos para la parada habían pasado y yo las avisaba de una partida inminente que no llegaba nunca a producirse. Así, al alba de cada amanecer, me escondían entre la maleza de sus pubis. Comprendí que me hallaba dulcemente anclado, cuando comprobé que ambas muchachas habían abandonado la depilación y su cuerpo corría libre bajo frágiles ropas.

Las contemplaba durmiendo, domésticas y enigmáticas, y se me iba la hora de marcharme. La habitación se cubría de objetos esparcidos, las ropas se mezclaban en desorden. Me gustaba ser un objeto más. No sacudía el polvo que los iba cubriendo. Todos se quedaban donde estaban, en la misma forma y disposición. Sus ropas me ensimismaban y no sentía nostalgia de mi orden doméstico. En aquel lugar ni siquiera lograba poner en disposición mi propio ser. Quedaba envuelto por todas esas formas que esparcían las nubes por el firmamento, y también dentro de mi corazón.

El coche se encontraba perfectamente preparado para seguir el viaje, y mi maleta dispuesta. Sin embargo revisaba una vieja bicicleta, aceitaba su cadena y salía de madrugada, lentamente, a recorrer la línea de la playa. A veces lograba alcanzar Ypsos, un arenal más pequeño cubierto de guijarros, y subía al monte Pantokratos, el más alto de la isla, rodeado de bosques y dominando la bahía. En este paseo matutino me cruzaba con los ferrys que llegaban de Italia o los que partían en dirección a Patrás. Al final del arenal de Dassia, en una curva donde ya no se divisaba el punto de partida, había un casetón de bebidas que servía por la noche como bulliciosa discoteca. En uno de sus muros se leía su nombre: “La tortuga ecuestre.” Pero, un poco antes, a distancia prudente de este local lúdico al aire libre, observé cómo tomaban posición un par de grandes camiones. Llevaban la luminotecnica y el *atrezzo* para rodajes de cine. Detuve mi marcha y busqué una buena perspectiva para distraerme con el trabajo de los otros. Poco a poco, del interior de aquellos grandes estómagos, emergían los focos, grúas, rieles y cámaras, los cables y otros objetos que no conocía. Al final, debido a la confianza que nos otorga el tiempo transcurrido, me enteré por uno de los obreros que preparaban el rodaje de una película cuyos exteriores se habían localizado en la isla. Para asegurar mi soledad, nada comenté a mis carceleras. Decidí regresar al día siguiente y ofrecer mis servicios, aunque fueran gratuitos. Me levanté a las primeras luces y las dejé dormidas, abandonadas en su desnuda geografía. A veces me reclinaba en el camastro y las contemplaba hasta el despertar, no para perderme en el deseo, sino para cuidar de sus sueños. El vello de Maite era más fértil que el vello de Victoria, pero el de ésta enraizaba en zonas más abismales.

Llegué al plató cuando ya habían comenzado las labores de preparación. Ahora a los camiones iniciales se habían unido otras *roulottes* para albergar a algunos de los actores y al propio director. Mi ayuda voluntaria sirvió para acarrear bultos pesados y disponer mejor todo. Pero mis pesquisas relacionadas con la ficha del film no progresaron mucho. Dilucidé de los comentarios que era un *péplum* y me causó una emoción muy especial encontrarme en Grecia y asistir al rodaje de un género cinematográfico tan querido por mí. A medida que el día avanzaba aquel extraño paisaje de objetos dispersos se fue cubriendo de actores vestidos de época. Comprendí de inmediato, por la indumentaria, que no eran romanos, sino griegos, y este primer requerimiento me fue confirmando por la pizarra de la claqueta, donde figuraba escrito, en italiano, el título siguiente: *I rostri di Helena*. Si no fuera porque había entablado alguna amistad entre los técnicos y aceptado el compromiso de echarles una mano, hubiera regresado a mi inquieto estado contemplativo, pues descubrí lo aburrido, lo lento y lo tedioso que es el realizar una película. El final de la jornada laboral se resolvía apenas con unos pocos minutos de celuloide válido. Al sexto día de estar ocupado en estos menesteres, pendiente de las últimas promesas de partida de mis amigas, llegué al rodaje como siempre a la hora del alba. La preocupación y expectación eran mayores, porque ese día ya no intervenían extras ni actores secundarios, sino los protagonistas principales. Todo parecía preparado y, aún así, tuvieron que transcurrir tres horas para que la acción se reiniciara. Yo estaba sentado a la sombra de una jirafa tomándome un refresco, cuando oí

que se abría la puerta de uno de aquellos móviles camerinos y aparecía Helena que, para mi asombro, no era otra que la actriz Rossana Podestà, que ya había interpretado ese mismo papel, unos diez años antes, en el filme de Robert Wise *Helena de Troya*. La escena que se rodaba consistía en la interpretación de tres personajes, dos hombres y una mujer, rodeados por un pequeño cuerpo de ejército, en medio de la playa. Uno de ellos trataba de atravesarla con la espada, mientras el otro guerrero lo impedía. Entre los tres se entablaba un diálogo de amenazas y reproches que finalizaban con el perdón de la protagonista. Se hicieron varias tomas no por error o fallo en la dicción o en los gestos, sino porque el que agarraba amenazador a la actriz lo hacía con tal violencia que sobrepasaba las exigencias de la dirección de actores. Durante la comida me enteré de que la disputa repetía la de Agamenón con su hermano Menelao para evitar que éste matase a su traidora mujer. Y aquella extrema violencia, castigada con la incesante repetición, provenía de las disputas que mantenía la pareja protagonista, recientemente separados en la vida real. Los interiores de esta coproducción italo-franco-alemana ya se habían rodado en los estudios romanos de Cinecittà. El argumento del filme trataba de reconstruir lo que le pudo pasar a esta mujer “rica en hombres”, después de la caída y el incendio de Troya. Para ello su guionista y director, Duccio de Martino, se basaba en tres historias diferentes, contadas en la antigüedad por Eurípides, Hesíodo y Virgilio. El primero, en *Las troyanas*, dibujaba a una mujer trágica, suicida, inmolándose para lavar la culpa que había provocado tan grandes desgracias. Sin embargo, Hesíodo la eximía de responsabilidad, dado que jamás había estado en Troya, sino una falsa imagen suplantadora. En cuanto a Virgilio, en la *Eneida*, hacía que Venus evitase que la espada de Eneas la traspasara en castigo a su traición a los troyanos y la entrega de su indefenso cuñado, Deífobo, a la venganza feroz de Menelao.

Habían elegido Corfú para grabar las tomas exteriores debido a la cercanía, el aislamiento, la economía y la variedad de los paisajes. Rossana pasaba gran parte del tiempo sola, pues nadie quería optar, en la disputa personal, por uno o por otro. Una vez terminada la jornada, aquella Helena mítica se subía a su coche deportivo y desaparecía camino del hotel.

Cuando regresé a nuestro alojamiento y conté a Maite y Victoria mi pequeña aventura, mostraron ciertos celos y me anunciaron –después de semanas de dilación- su disposición a marcharse de la isla y continuar nuestro viaje interrumpido. Entonces me negué y les comuniqué –una mentira piadosa- el compromiso adquirido con la empresa productora de la película para trabajar hasta el final de las sesiones, en un par de semanas. Mi verdadera intención era ver, cara a cara, a aquella nueva Helena de carne y hueso pero, sobre todo, tocar sus manos. En *Helena de Troya*, Rossana Podestà hacía el papel de una mujer enamorada y fiel, lo mismo que el que representaba a París, Jacques Sernas. Cuando él muere a manos de Menelao, en medio del incendio y saqueo de la ciudad, tras la entrada del caballo de madera de Ulises, ella lo abraza y su blanda túnica y sus manos quedan llenas de sangre. En la escena siguiente, la última, Helena va en un navío de regreso a Grecia. Menelao todavía ve manchadas sus ropas y le aprieta las muñecas para mirarle las manos. Entonces, con gran enfado, lo ordena que se las cambie y que se lave. Y ella, mirándolo con odio, le contesta: ¡Jamás!

Las tomas de exteriores fueron cambiando a lugares no muy distantes de aquel primer emplazamiento. Yo acechaba el momento del encuentro. Debido a mi posición de alerta permanente, pude ver cómo Steve Reeves, abandonando la compañía de Stanley Baker y de Cedric Hardwicke, iba hacia Rossana cuando se retiraba del *set* a su camerino móvil. La paró e intercambiaron unas palabras. Ella lo rechazó y él la agarró de manera

furibunda hasta arrojarla al suelo. Entonces salí en su ayuda y recibí un fuerte golpe en la cabeza propinado con el mismo yelmo aqueo que él llevaba en sus manos. Durante unos instantes perdí el conocimiento. Al despertarme tenía todo el rostro empapado de sangre y la brecha abierta en la ceja seguía manando. Junto a mí estaba Rossana, o quién sabe si Helena, con su *péplum* y sus manos manchadas con mi linfa, tratando de contener la violenta hemorragia.

Maite y Victoria me recibieron como amantes despechadas, un rol que nunca me habían asignado. Volvimos a hablar de la partida –llevábamos allí casi dos meses- y de nuevo fue imposible ponernos de acuerdo. Insistían en pasar también septiembre. Pero mi tiempo se acababa y yo debía, ya no seguir a la Grecia continental, sino volver a Madrid para realizar los exámenes de septiembre. Cargué mi 127 y al día siguiente, al encenderlo, vi que no funcionaba. Durante varios días fui objeto de sus tretas, en verdad, placenteras e ingeniosas. El catorce de septiembre, la fecha de mi cumpleaños, las llevé a festejarlo a “La tortuga ecuestre”. Bebieron y bailaron agotadoramente mientras yo fingía hacer lo mismo. Me costó hacerlas regresar, y cayeron rendidas en sus camastros. Las miré por última vez, desnudas y confiadas. Entonces, no sé por qué, de uno de sus neceseres cogí una maquinilla de afeitar, rasuré con cuidado el vello de sus pubis, y lo guardé en sendos libros, como las hojas secas.

Desde la popa del ferry que iba hacia Brindisi vi la sombra de las colinas sobre los campos de trigo, las vides, los olivos, los naranjos y limoneros amargos de las islas.

## TEXT 6

**“Bitter Lemons” by César Antonio Molino, translated by Francisco Macías  
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Everything went well until we got to Corfu. It’s not that things started to go wrong there, but that this may have been an omen that our happiness had already been drawn out far too long. I was a new professor. Upon completing my first course as a lecturer, I bought myself a car: a white Fiat 127. My goal was to travel through Greece that summer, traversing those historic and literary places of which I had dreamed since my childhood. I was neither financially nor physically able to do this alone; and all the promises made to accompany me had fallen through.

Time was short; and it occurred to me to post a flyer in the department area. Two female students confirmed their interest with a phone call. I had had them in my course, but that relationship had ended. I set out with Maite and Victoria, from whom I was separated by only a few years. At first, it felt odd to travel with girls who I had maintained a certain degree of professional distance from; but their good nature and humor brought us closer very soon. We all drove; we all liked the monuments and ruins, and the camaraderie, and shared responsibility served to alleviate the heat and exhaustion. We had made our way across the south of France and then Italy; and we were already on the Brindisi-to-Corfu ferry to later cross onto the mainland. I announced our arrival at the port; and upon seeing the buildings that welcomed us there, I couldn't discern a difference from one country to another. Pompous Mussolinian constructions gave way to buildings and plazas, imported from the ancient French and English metropolises, in the historic center of the capital. It was dawn; we had the whole day ahead of us; and we decided to find a more rustic, almost military place, like a seaman’s barrack, removed from the hustle and bustle of

the city. The road signs took us to the northwest of the island. We were on the coastside road. We passed through Alykes, Kontokali, and the majestic Venetian shipyards of Gouvia, then Kommeno, Daphnila, and, finally, Dassia, which had an immense beach nearly fifteen kilometers long. Some orchards reached down to the whitest sands. There, in the Ionian Sea, we were able to take our first Greek bath. I lay down under the shade of some olive trees; and when I woke up, I saw Victoria still floating on the water and Maite, who returned from who knows where, gesticulating with an elderly woman all dressed in black. I had found lodging in that very spot. It was an old stable, which was now coarsely renovated. It had three bunks, a dining table, and a small oven, all in one open space. Outside were the water closet and a washbasin that served as both a bath and shower without hot water. The price was reasonable, and the small barrack seemed a suitable place to gain new strength for the assault on the Greek mainland. The landlady's house and grove were very close, and the woman would gather fresh fruit and vegetables for us. All was perfect, even in the intimate chastity that we practiced. Time passed slowly and I allowed myself to get lost in the "why?" of earthly things, while they became brackish women, iodized and with aquatic eyes, with seaweed hair that was tousled by a couple of nets that were hanging from the ceiling like bridal veils. From our encampment we went up to the north of the island, to Kassiope, where Tiberius built another one of his mansions, and we also headed down toward the south. At Gastouri was the Achilleion, a palace built by Sisi, the melancholic empress, in honor of Thetis and Achilles—a neoclassical building, with beautiful gardens headed by the statues of the triumphant hero, fatally wounded in the heel. At Korkyra we spent many afternoons in the terraces of the Spianada Square of the archway, which reminded us of the Rue de Rivoli of Paris. While they frugally toured the narrow streets replete with eye-catching shop windows, I visited the pediment of Medusa, she who mortally enthralled. Her demented smile, her bulging eyes, the curly snakes of her hair and her waist, her immense mouth from which a wide and bifurcated tongue must have stuck out, like that of a snake, they petrified me. I felt well in the island of the Phaeacians, where Nausicaa found the wayward Ulysses; but the days proposed for the last stop had passed. I spoke of an imminent departure that never happened. At the dawn of every daybreak, I was hidden by them in the dense down of their pubis. I came to understand that I was sweetly anchored when I confirmed that both young women had suspended their depilatory practices and that their bodies ran freely under their dainty clothes. I gazed upon them as they slept, homely and enigmatic; and the hour to leave escaped me. The bedroom became covered with scattered objects; the clothes were stirred in disarray. I enjoyed being one more object. I didn't brush off the dust that began to cover them. Everything remained in place, where it was, in the same manner and arrangement. I was entangled in their clothes, and I didn't feel the nostalgia of my domestic order. In that place I could not even manage to put myself in order. I remained enveloped by all those forms that were scattered by the clouds across that firmament and also within my heart.

The car was perfectly prepared to continue the trip and my suitcase ready. Yet I inspected an old bicycle, oiled its chain, and set out at dawn, slowly, to walk along the shoreline. I managed to reach Ipsos—a sandlot covered with pebbles—and climbed Mount Pantokrator, the highest mountain of the island, surrounded by forests and overlooking the bay. On this morning stroll I came across the ferries that arrived from Italy or those that set out en route to Patras. At the end of the sandlot that was Dassia, along a curve from which you could no longer see the spot we'd set out from, there was a beverage stand that served drinks all night as if it were a bustling nightclub. Upon one of its walls was its name: "*La*



*tortuga ecuestre*” [The Equestrian Turtle]. A bit earlier, at a safe distance from that playful outdoor locale, I watched as a couple of large trucks took their place. They carried the lighting equipment and props for a film shoot. I stopped in my tracks and looked for a good perspective from which I could get distracted by the work of others. Little by little, from the depths of those great stomachs, emerged the spotlights, cranes, rails, and cameras, along with the cables and other objects that were unknown to me. At the end, due to the familiarity that shared time grants us, I found out what these objects were from one of the laborers who prepared the footage of a film whose outdoor scenes were set on the island. To ensure my solitude, I shared nothing with my captors. I decided to return the next day and offer my services to the crew, even if for free. I woke up at first light and left them in their slumber, abandoning them in their undressed geography. Sometimes I would lie back on the cot and gaze upon them until they woke, not to get lost in desire but to keep watch over their dreams. Maite’s hair was denser than Victoria’s, but the latter’s took root in more abyssal zones.

When I arrived at the set preparation was already underway. By now those first few tractors had been hitched to other trailers to shelter some of the actors and the director himself. My voluntary help served to haul the heavy loads and to better prepare everything. But my research on the information sheet for the film did not progress much. I was able to deduce from the comments made that it was a *peplum* [sword-and-sandal], and this brought on a very special surge of excitement, to find myself in Greece and to attend the filming of a cinematographic genre so dear to me. As the day progressed, that strange landscape of scattered objects became covered with actors in period costumes. I understood immediately, based on their attire, that they were not Romans but Greeks; and this first requirement came to be confirmed by the slate blackboard where the following title was written in Italian: *I rostri di Helena* [The Rostra of Helen]. Had I not developed a sort of friendship with the technicians and agreed to lend a helping hand, I would have returned to my restless and contemplative state, for I discovered how boring, slow, and tedious it is to make a film. The end of the work day was resolved with nothing but a few minutes of suitable celluloid. On the sixth day of being engaged in these matters, awaiting my friends’ latest promises to leave, I arrived at the film shoot, as always, at the break of dawn. Concerns and expectations were higher, because that day would not involve extras or supporting actors but the main protagonists. Everything seemed ready and, even then, three hours had to pass in order for the action to resume. I was seated in the shadow of a giraffe sipping a soft drink, when I heard the door to one of those mobile dressing rooms. Out came Helen who, to my surprise, was none other than the actress Rossana Podestà, who had already played the same role, some ten years ago, in Robert Wise’s film *Helen of Troy*. In the scene, three actors—two men and a woman—were portraying the historical characters, surrounded by a small army corps, in the middle of the beach. One of the men tried to pierce the woman with a sword, while the other warrior prevented it. Among the three, a dialogue of threats and accusations developed that ended with the forgiveness of the protagonist. Several scenes were reshot not because of errors or flaws in diction or gestures, but because the actor who played the threatening role did it with such violence; so much so that he exceeded the demands of the director’s instructions. During lunch I learned that the dispute would re-enact Agamemnon’s quarrel with his brother Menelaus, in which he tries to prevent the latter from killing his treacherous wife. And that extreme violence, exacerbated by incessant repetition, stemmed from the disputes maintained by the protagonist couple, who had recently split up in real life. The interiors of this Italo-Franco-

German coproduction had already been shot in the Cinecittà studios in Rome. The film attempted to recreate what might have happened to this woman “rich in men,” after the fall and burning of Troy. For that purpose, the screenwriter and director, Duccio de Martino, borrowed from three different stories, told by Euripides, Hesiod, and Virgil in antiquity. The first scene, reminiscent of *The Trojan Women*, depicted a tragic woman, suicidal, making sacrifices in order to wash away the guilt that had provoked such a disgraceful series of events. However, Hesiod exonerated her of any responsibility given that she had never been in Troy and her recollection was nothing but a false, supplanted, image. As for Virgil, in the *Aeneid*, he made Venus stay Aeneas’s sword from piercing her as punishment for her treason to the Trojans and the delivery of her defenseless brother-in-law, Deiphobus, to the fierce vengeance of Menelaus. They had chosen Corfu to film the outdoor scenes due to its proximity, isolation, the economy, and variety of the scenery. Rossana spent most of her time alone, since no one wanted to take a side one way or another, with respect to the private quarrel. At the end of the day, that mythical Helen climbed into her sports car and disappeared en route to the hotel.

When I returned to our lodging and told Maite and Victoria about my little adventure, they showed a certain amount of jealousy and announced—after weeks of delay—their willingness to leave the island and resume our interrupted journey. I refused and told them—a white lie—of my commitment to the production to work until the end of filming, in a couple of weeks. My real intention was to see, face to face, that new Helen of flesh and bone and, above all, to touch her hands. In *Helen of Troy*, Rossana Podestà played the role of a faithful woman in love; Jacques Sernas portrayed Paris. When he dies at the hands of Menelaus, in the midst of the burning and pillaging of the city, after the entry of Ulysses’s wooden horse, she holds him; and her white tunic and her hands end up covered in blood. In the following scene, the last one, Helen is on a ship headed back for Greece. Menelaus still sees her blood-stained clothes and grasps her wrists to look at her hands. Then, with great ire, he orders her to change and to wash up. And she, staring with hate, answers: “Never!”

The exterior shots changed to places not far from that first location. I kept watch for the moment of our encounter. Because of my position of constant watchfulness, I could see how Steve Reeves, leaving the company of Stanley Baker and Cedric Hardwicke, made his way toward Rossana when she retired from the set to her dressing room trailer. He stopped her and they exchanged a few words. She rejected him; and he grabbed her in a furious manner and threw her to the floor. I sprang to her aid and received a hard blow to the head, inflicted with the same Achaean helmet he held in his hands. For a few minutes, I lost consciousness. When I came to, my whole face was soaked in blood and the gash opened in my brow was still bleeding. Next to me was Rossana, or who knows, Helen, with her *peplum* and her hands stained with my blood, trying to contain the violent hemorrhage.

Maite and Victoria welcomed me like abandoned lovers, a role I had never played. We spoke of our departure—we had been there for nearly two months; and, again, it was impossible for us to come to an agreement. They insisted on spending September there, too. But my time was running out, and I felt I should no longer continue the trip to the Greek mainland, but return to Madrid for September exams. I loaded my Fiat 127, and on the next day, when I turned the ignition, I saw that it didn’t work. For several days, I was subjected to their ruses that were, indeed, pleasant and witty. On September 14, the date of my birthday, I took them to celebrate at “*La tortuga ecuestre*.” They drank and danced to

exhaustion while I feigned the same. I struggled to make them return and they fell exhausted on their cots. I saw them for the last time, undressed and unwary. Then, for some unknown reason, I took a safety razor from one of their toiletry kits, and gingerly shaved the down from their pelvises; and I saved each of them in a book of its own, as with dry leaves.

From the stern of the ferry that was heading for Brindisi, I saw the shadow of the hills over the fields of wheat, the vineyards, the olive trees, the orange trees, and the bitter lemon trees of the island.

## TEXT 7

**“Guiando la Hiedra” by Hebe Uhart**

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Aquí estoy acomodando las plantas, para que no se estorben unas a otras, ni tengan partes muertas, ni hormigas. Me produce placer observar cómo crecen con tan poco; son sensatas y se acomodan a sus recipientes; si éstos son chicos, se achican, si tienen espacio, crecen más. Son diferentes de las personas: algunas personas, con una base mezquina, adquieren unas frondosidades que impiden percibir su real tamaño; otras, de gran corazón y capacidad, quedan aplastadas y confundidas por el peso de la vida. En eso pienso cuando riego y trasplanto y en las distintas formas de ser de las plantas: tengo una que es resistente al sol, dura, como del desierto, que tomó para sí sólo el verde necesario para sobrevivir; después una hiedra grande, bonita, intrascendente, que no tiene la menor pretensión de originalidad porque se parece a cualquier hiedra que se puede comprar en todos lados, con su verde tornasolado. Pero tengo otra hiedra, de color verde uniforme, que se volvió chica; ella parece decir: "Los tornasoles no son para mí"; ella responde creciendo muy lentamente, umbría y segura en su cautela. Es la planta que más quiero; de vez en cuando la guío, yo comprendo para dónde quiere ir y ella entiende para dónde yo la quiero guiar. A la hiedra tornasolada a veces le digo "estúpida" porque hace unos arabescos al pedo; a la planta del desierto la respeto por su resistencia, pero a veces me parece fea. Pero me parece fea cuando la veo con la mirada de otras personas, cuando viene visita: a mí en general me gustan todas. Por ejemplo hay una especie de margarita chica, silvestre, que la llaman flor de bicho colorado; no sé con qué criterio se la distingue de la margarita. A veces miro mi jardín como si fuera de otro y descubro dos defectos: uno, que pocas plantas caen graciosamente, con cierta frondosidad y movimientos sinuosos: mis plantas son como quietitas, cortitas, metidas en su maceta. El segundo defecto es que tengo una gran cantidad de macetitas chicas, de todos los tamaños, en vez de grandes macizos estructurados, bien pensados; porque fui demorando mucho esa tarea de tirar lastre, digamos y la misma expresión, tirar lastre, o sanear, referida a mis plantas, tiene algo de maligno. Fui demorando todo lo posible el uso de la malignidad necesaria para sobrevivir, ignorándola en mí y en otros. Vinculo la malignidad a la mundanidad, a la capacidad de discernir inmediatamente si una planta es flor de bicho colorado o margarita, si una piedra es preciosa o despreciable. Vinculo o vinculaba malignidad a desprecio electivo en función de algunos objetivos que ahora no me son extraños: el trato con gente, con mucha gente, los rencores, la reiteración de personas y situaciones; en fin, el reemplazo del asombro por el espíritu detectivesco me contaminó a mí también de maldad. Pero me siguen asombrando algunas cosas. Yo hace cuatro o cinco años había rogado a dios o a los dioses que no me



volviera drástica, depreciativa. Yo decía: "Dios mío, que no me vuelva como la madre de 'Las de Barranco'". La vida de esa madre era un perpetuo aquelarre; invadía los asuntos de los que la rodeaban, vivía su vida a través de ellos, de modo que no se sabía cuáles eran sus verdaderos deseos; no tenía otro placer que no fuera la astucia. Yo, antes de ser un poco como la de Barranco, miraba a ese modelo como algo espantoso y una vez incorporado, me sentí más cómoda: la comodidad de dejar lastre y olvidar, cuando hay tanto para recordar que no se quiere volver atrás. Ahora a la mañana pienso una cosa, a la tarde, otra. Mis decisiones no duran más allá de una hora y están exentas del sentimiento de ebriedad que las solía acompañar antes; ahora decido por necesidad, cuando no tengo más remedio. Por eso otorgo escaso valor a mis pensamientos y decisiones; antes mis pensamientos me enamoraban; yo quería lo que pensaba; ahora pienso lo que quiero. Pero lo que quiero se me confunde con lo que debo y perdí la capacidad de llorar; debo distraerme mucho de lo que quiero y debo, o simplemente estoy en una especie de limbo donde se sufre un poco: algunas contrariedades (cuyo efecto puede ser previsto), pequeñas frustraciones (susceptibles de ser analizadas y compensadas). Descubrí la parte de invento que tienen las necesidades y los deberes: pero los respeto en seco, sin gran adhesión, porque organizan la vida. Si lloro, es más bien sin mi consentimiento, debo distraerme de lo que quiero y debo; sólo permito que aflore un poquito de agua. Los sentimientos hacia las personas también han cambiado; lo que antes era odio, a veces por motivos ideológicos muy elaborados, ahora es sólo dolor de barriga, un aburrimiento se traduce en dolor de cabeza. Perdí la inmediatez que facilita el trato con los chicos y aunque sé que se recupera con tres carreritas y dos morisquetas, no tengo ganas de hacerlas, porque envidia todo lo que hacen ellos: correr, nadar, jugar, desear mucho y pedir hasta el infinito. Últimamente me he pasado gran parte del tiempo criticando la educación de los chicos porteños con quien fuese, y sobre todo con los taximetreros. En general nos ponemos de acuerdo; sí, los chicos porteños son muy mal educados. Pero es un acuerdo tan triste, que a partir de ese tema no cunde ninguna conversación.

Pienso ahora que el motivo de la quema de brujas no fue ni andar por el aire con la escoba, ni las asambleas que hacían; era más bien el que picaran huesos, picaran sesos hasta dejarlos bien molidos. También dejaban orejas de cerdo en remojo y usaban el caldo para dar brillo a los pisos; de paso, podía ser que alguien patinara y se cayera, esto como un beneficio muy ulterior; ellas no le atribuían demasiada importancia. Las brujas mataban así tres pájaros de un tiro y ése era su poder. Rumiando reconstituían los pensamientos, los cocinaban y también cocinaban el tiempo para obtener el mismo producto bajo diferentes formas. Por ejemplo, el gato; la bruja no tiene antepasados, ni marido, ni hijos; el gato representa todo eso para ella, con el gato anula la muerte. La bruja trabaja como los jíbaros, para reconstituir un orden de lo semivivo; por eso remoja, hierve y mezcla perfumes con sustancias asquerosas: es para rescatar del olvido a las sustancias asquerosas; se las recuerda a los que quieren olvidarlas en nombre del encanto, de la estética y de la vida viva. No, no es por franquear las distancias por lo que fueron castigadas; fue por la trama secreta de la experimentación que podía alterar la inmediatez de los sentimientos, de las decisiones, de los seres, que la vida sostiene con las reglas que le son propias. Y no retrocede ante la cruz, como se dice, porque es un objeto inanimado; retrocede ante el cordero pascual.

Ahora, que soy un poco bruja, me observo una veta grosera. Como directamente de la cacerola, muy rápido, o hago lo contrario, voy a un restaurante donde todos mastican reglamentariamente seis veces cada bocado, para la salud y me produce placer masticar — así como si fuéramos caballos, me enamoro de las chancletas viejas, tiro demasiada agua a

las plantas después de lavar el balcón para que caiga barro y ensucie lo lavado (anulo el tiempo, ya que vuelvo a limpiar), cocino mucho, porque encuentro placer en que lo crudo se vuelva cocido y desestimo totalmente los argumentos ecologistas; si el planeta se destruye dentro de doscientos años, me gustaría resucitar para ver el espectáculo. Cambio impresiones con algunas brujas amigas y nuestra conversación se reduce a fugaces comunicados, historias de obstinaciones diversas, controles mutuos de brujerías, para perfeccionarlas, por ejemplo, aprender a matar tres pájaros de un tiro, no necesariamente para hacer maldades, pero igual para ganarle al tiempo, para no gastar pólvora en chimango, para no dar por el pito más de lo que el pito vale, cuando en realidad un pito es algo muy difícil de evaluar.

Pero no siempre fue así, no fue así. Antes de que yo pensara en tirar lastre y en matar dos pájaros de un tiro, sufrí en dos años como nunca había sufrido en mi vida, una mañana lloré con igual intensidad por dos motivos distintos.

Entendí qué pasa con los que se mueren y con los que se van; vuelven en sueños y dicen: "Estoy, pero no estoy; estoy, pero me voy" y yo les digo: "Quedate otro ratito" y no dan ninguna explicación. Si se quedan lo hacen como ajenos, en otra cosa, y me miran como visitas lejanas. En esa región del olvido adonde han ido tienen otras profesiones y han adquirido otro modo de ser. Y todo lo que hemos peleado, hablado, comido y reído pasa al olvido y no quiero yo conocer personas nuevas ni ver a mis amigos; en cuanto empiezo a hablar con alguien, ya lo mando yo misma a la región del olvido, antes de que le llegue el turno de irse o de morir.

Me despierto y percibo que estoy viva, amanece. No viene ninguna idea a mi cabeza; nada para hacer, nada para pensar. No pienso seguir fumando en la cama sin ninguna idea en la cabeza. De repente me agarran muy buenos propósitos pero sin relación a nada concreto: me lavo, me peino, caliento agua; me voy entonando y los buenos propósitos aumentan. Es un día de marzo y la luz va viniendo pareja, los pajaritos trabajan, van de acá para allá. Yo también voy a trabajar. Ya sé lo que voy a hacer: voy a guiar la hiedra, pero no con un hilo grosero, la voy a atar con un hilo vegetal. Ella está ahí, firme contra la pared: le saco las hojas muertas a la hiedra y a todo lo que veo. Podría decir que tengo un ataque de sacar hojas muertas pero no es adecuada la expresión porque es un ataque tranquilo, pero no pienso terminar hasta que no haya sacado la última hormiga y la última hoja que no sirve. Amontono todas esas macetas chicas, van a ir a otras casas, tal vez con otras plantas. Pasa un avión muy alto y de repente me agarran una felicidad y una paz tan grandes al hacer este trabajo que lo hago más despacio para que no termine. Me gustaría que viniera alguien para que me encontrara así, a la mañana. Pero todos están haciendo otros trabajos distintos, tal vez sufran o renieguen o se engripen; no importa, eso pasa y en algún momento tendrán alguna felicidad como ésta mía. Me siento tan humilde y tan gentil al mismo tiempo que agradecería a alguien, pero no sé a quién. Reviso mi jardín y tengo hambre, me merezco un durazno. Enciendo la radio y oigo que hablan de la onza troy: no sé qué es, ni me importa: arre, hermosa vida.

## **TEXT 8**

**“Guiding the Ivy” by Hebe Uhart, translated by Maureen Shaughnessy**

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Here I am arranging the plants so they don't disturb one another, pruning them and ridding them of ants. It pleases me to watch them grow with so little. They're sensible and adapt to their receptacles. If the pots are small the plants shrink, if given space they grow bigger. They're different from people: some people, with a mean disposition, acquire a stature that masks their true nature; others, with a big heart and ability, can end up trampled upon and overcome by the weight of life. This is what I think about as I water and transplant, this and the different personalities of each plant.

I have one plant that's tolerant to sunlight, tough, as if from the desert, which takes in only the green it needs to survive. Another is a large, attractive, insignificant ivy that doesn't have the slightest claim to originality because it looks like any old ivy you can buy anywhere, with its iridescent green. But I have another ivy, a uniform green, which has gotten smaller. It seems to say, "Iridescence is not for me." It responds by growing very slowly, shaded and sure in its caution. This is the plant I love the most. Every now and then I guide it. I understand where it wants to go and it understands where I want to guide it. Sometimes I call the iridescent ivy "stupid" because it forms into pointless arabesques. And the desert plant I respect for its robustness, but sometimes I think it's ugly. It seems ugly when I see it through the eyes of others, when someone stops over for a visit. In general I like them all. For example, there's a type of small, wild daisy known as the red bug flower. I don't know which criteria are used to distinguish it from the daisy.

Sometimes I look at my garden as if it were someone else's and I discover two flaws: one, that few plants hang gracefully, with the right verdure and sinuous movements. My plants are motionless, stumpy, lodged in their pots. The second flaw is that I have a lot of small flowerpots, varying in size, instead of ones that are large, solid, well-made and well-designed. It's because I kept putting off the task of, shall we say, lightening my burden and if I use the same expression—lightening the burden, or tidying up—when referring to my plants, it has something malicious to it. For as long as possible I put off using the malice needed to survive, ignoring it in myself and in others. I associate malice with the mundane, with the ability to immediately make out whether a plant is a red bug flower or a daisy, whether a stone is precious or worthless. I associate (or used to associate) malice with the choice to be disrespectful, according to certain objectives which no longer surprise me: the way I treat people—lots of people—grudges, the repetition of people and situations. Anyway, replacing wonder with a detective spirit has tainted me with malice, too.

But some things still amaze me. About four or five years ago I prayed to God (or to the gods) not to let me become drastic, scornful. I would say, "Dear Lord, don't let me become like the mother in that play *Las de Barranco*." That woman's life was a perpetual witches' sabbath. She poked her nose into the business of everyone around her. She lived her life through them, so her real wishes weren't clear; her only pleasure was shrewdness. Before I became a little bit like the Barranco mother I was horrified by that archetype, but once it became part of me I felt more comfortable: the comfort of letting go and forgetting when there's so much to remember that you don't want to look back.

Nowadays, I think one way in the morning and another in the afternoon. My decisions don't last longer than an hour and they lack the sense of euphoria that used to accompany them. Now I make a decision out of necessity, when I have no other choice. That's why I trivialize my thoughts and decisions. My thoughts used to beguile me, I loved what I thought. Now I think what I want, but what I want gets mixed up with what I should

and I've lost the ability to cry. I have to distract myself a lot from what I want and what I should, or I'm simply in a state of limbo where I suffer a bit: some setbacks (whose effect can be foreseen), small frustrations (susceptible to being analyzed and rectified). I discovered the part of invention that needs and duties have—and I respect them, period, without much commitment, because they organize life. If I cry it's more often against my will. I have to distract myself from what I want and what I should, I only allow a few tears to well up.

My feelings toward people have also changed. What used to be hate—sometimes for very elaborate ideological reasons—is now only a stomachache, boredom now translates into a headache. I've lost the immediacy that makes interaction with children easy and even though I know could regain it with three short races and two funny faces, I don't want to because I envy everything they do: run, swim, play, long for so much and ask endlessly. Lately I've spent a great deal of time criticizing the manners of children in Buenos Aires with whomever, especially with taxi drivers. In general we agree: by all means, the children here are rude. But it's such a sad consensus that no conversation can develop from there.

I now believe that the reason behind the witch hunts was not because they flew through the air on broomsticks, or because of their covens. Rather, it was because they chopped up bones, they ground up brains. They also soaked pigs' ears and used the broth to shine the floors. Perhaps someone might slip and fall—this being an extremely ulterior motive; they didn't give it much importance. That's how witches would kill three birds with one stone, and *that* was their power. They reconstructed thoughts by ruminating on them, they cooked them and also cooked time to obtain the same product in different forms. For example, the cat: the witch has no ancestors, or husband or children. The cat represents all these for her, with the cat she negates death. The witch works like the Jivaros to reconstruct an order of the half-alive. That's why she soaks, boils and mixes perfumes with foul substances: it's to rescue the foul substances from oblivion. She revives them for those who want to forget them in the name of charm, esthetics and living beings. No, those women were not punished because they could overcome distances. They were punished because they schemed to alter the immediacy of feelings, decisions, and beings that life sustains with its own rules. And a witch does not retreat when confronted with the cross, as they say, because it's an inanimate object. She retreats from the Easter lamb.

Now that I am a bit of a witch I can see my rude streak. I eat directly from the pot, very quickly—or I do the opposite, I go to a restaurant where everyone painstakingly chews each bite six times in the name of health and I find pleasure in chewing, as if we were horses. I fall in love with old slippers. I throw too much water on the plants after cleaning the balcony so that mud drips from the pots, (thus dirtying that which has been washed—I negate time, since I have to clean again). I cook a lot, because I take pleasure in the raw becoming cooked. And I wholly reject ecological arguments, if the planet self-destructs in two hundred years I'd like to rise from the grave to watch the show. I exchange impressions with my other witchy friends and our conversation is confined to fleeting words, stories of our various obsessions, mutual tests of witchcraft, to perfect them; for example, learning to kill three birds with one stone—not necessarily to do evil, but rather to beat time, to pick our battles wisely, not go around flogging dead horses when a dead horse can't even take you for a ride.

But it wasn't always like this, it wasn't like this. Before I thought about letting go and killing two birds with one stone I suffered for two years as I had never before suffered in my life. One morning I cried with the same intensity for two different reasons.

I understood what happens to those who die and those who leave. They come back in dreams and say, "I'm here, but I'm not here. I'm here but I'm leaving," and I say to them, "Stay a little longer," but they give no explanation. If they stay it's as if they were withdrawn, somewhere else, and they look at me like distant visitors. In that realm of oblivion where they've gone they have other professions and have changed the way they are. And everything we've argued and spoken about, eaten and laughed about becomes part of oblivion and I don't want to meet new people or see my friends. As soon as I start talking to someone it's me who sends them to the realm of oblivion, before they have time to leave or die.

I wake up and sense that I'm alive, morning comes. My head is blank; nothing to do, nothing to think. I'm not about to stay in bed smoking with no ideas in my head. Suddenly, I'm overcome with extremely good intentions unrelated to anything in particular: I shower, comb my hair, heat up water. I wake up and my good intentions surge. It's a day in March and the sunlight shines evenly, the little birds toil, they flit from here to there. I am going to work, too. I know what I'll do: I'm going to guide the ivy, but not with an ordinary string, I'll tie it with vegetable string. There it is, secure against the wall. I remove the dead leaves from the ivy and everything else in sight. You could say that I have a dead leaf-removing fit, but the expression isn't right because it's a calm fit; still, I wouldn't dare stop until I've removed the last ant and the last ailing leaf. I stack all those small flowerpots; they'll go to other homes, maybe with other plants. A plane flies by high overhead and suddenly I'm filled with such joy and peace by performing this task that I do it even more slowly, so as not to finish. I'd like someone to come find me like this, in the morning. But everyone is absorbed in other, different jobs—perhaps they're suffering or complaining or coming down with the flu—it doesn't matter, it'll pass and at some point they'll experience some sort of happiness like I'm feeling now. I feel so humbled and so kind at the same time that I could thank someone, although I don't know who. I look over my garden and I'm hungry, I deserve a peach. I turn on the radio and hear them talking about the troy ounce. I don't know what it is, nor do I care. Giddy up, beautiful life.

## **TEXT 9**

**“El Viaje” by Melanie Taylor Herrera  
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Algunas de las mujeres más viejas solían describir el viaje con todos sus detalles: el olor nauseabundo de las defecaciones, los orines, la sangre y la comida podrida; los gritos desgarradores de aquellos que morían sufriendo los más terribles dolores atados a sus grilletes; el llanto de los niños y de los infantes, a veces aun tratando de succionar el seno de una madre ya muerta; las conversaciones a gritos de un lugar a otro del barco entre aquellos que podían entenderse. Las mujeres que habían sobrevivido la travesía en el barco hablaban de esto en contadas ocasiones, pues pocas veces tenían la posibilidad de reunirse. Habían sido diseminadas entre los diferentes monasterios y casas donde estaban muy ocupadas en la huerta, la cocina, la lavandería y la limpieza en general. Hoy era una excepción; toda la ciudad había acudido a la procesión: los funcionarios de la Corona, las



familias acaudaladas y las pobres, los religiosos y las monjas, los criados, los comerciantes de paso por la ciudad, hasta los negros esclavos y libertos que vivían en Malambo y Pierdevidas se sumaron al final. Ella iba entre las criadas y algunas negras libertas que aprovechaban la oportunidad para poder hablar con desahogo de las cosas pasadas y presentes y del futuro ataque que los señores y los religiosos no cesaban de debatir. Había tanto que hablar en tan poco tiempo que se le hacía difícil concentrarse en una sola conversación. La anciana a su lado insistía en hablarle de la travesía entre la tierra natal y esta nueva ciudad, cuando ella en realidad quería saber qué ocurriría si llegaban los ingleses.

La procesión partió de la Plaza Mayor, frente a la Catedral, y se enrumbo por la Calle de la Empedrada. Encabezaba la procesión el mismísimo Don Juan Pérez de Guzmán, acompañado de soldados que llevaban la imagen de la Inmaculada Concepción de María. La ciudad bullía, estaba llena de gente y vida, pues con el ataque en ciernes, los españoles habían mandado a buscar refuerzos de otros poblados como Natá y la Villa de los Santos y hasta de indios flecheros, cuya llegada a la ciudad había causado mucha curiosidad, aunque ella no los había podido ver, encerrada como estaba la mayor parte del tiempo dentro del convento. También al frente, junto al Gobernador, estaban los más altos dignatarios de las comunidades religiosas de la ciudad, y los señores de las familias más acaudaladas. El señor Terín no faltaría, sin duda. Siguiendo sus pasos los religiosos de las comunidades y algunas monjas. Detrás de ellos iban las familias españolas, en particular las mujeres y sus criadas domésticas, quienes las asistían en caso de que alguna se desmayara durante la caminata o necesitara agua. Más atrás iban ellas: las sirvientas de los conventos e iglesias, o de las familias menos pudientes, los negros y negras libertos, los indios, mezclados en un todo multicolor y disparatado, cuya conversación se unía a los cantos de los religiosos al frente de la procesión. El sagrado sacramento era llevado en alto al lado de la imagen de la Concepción por un monje muy joven y de cara muy seria, quien miraba de reojo al Padre Sancho Pardo de Andrade y Figueroa, jefe de la diócesis istmeña. Ella salía muy poco del convento de la Concepción. Había llegado a edad temprana y habían pasado ya muchos años desde entonces. A pesar del tiempo transcurrido aún recordaba su llegada de la mano de un hombre a quien una monja recibió a la entrada. La mujer, cubierta rigurosamente de pie a cabeza, la miró con curiosidad, leyó un papel y luego le ordenó que la siguiese. La llevó a una cocina enorme donde varias mujeres negras se ocupaban de diversas faenas. "Tienen una nueva ayudante", dijo la monja con voz autoritaria para luego desaparecer. Una de las mujeres se le acercó con una risa burlona en el rostro.

—¡Tamaño ayudanta nos mandan las señoras, casi no alcanza la mesa! ¿Hablará castellano? Porque si la acaban de sacar del barco... La cocina estalló en risas.

—¡Déjala en paz, María!—gritó una de las mujeres, la mayor, una negra canosa de rostro tan amable que ella se le acercó corriendo. La mujer la abrazó dulcemente y le dijo al oído algo en una lengua que ella no entendía, pues había nacido en las Colonias y fue separada de su madre muy temprano, sólo entendía castellano.

—¡Le pondremos Candela, para que desde ya le coja gusto al fogón!—gritó María.

—No—dijo la anciana—le pondremos Mercedes.

Mercedes aprendió a ocuparse de la huerta y ayudaba en la cocina, pero no se le enviaba ni al mercado ni a hacer mandados. Las monjas tenían ciertas criadas de confianza para estos menesteres. Una de ellas era María, la Flaca, para distinguirla así de otra criada, María, la Gorda. La Flaca era enviada con frecuencia al mercado a comprar la carne y las

legumbres. Ahí, una negra liberta, a quien llamaban La Tuerta, le había contado todos los detalles de la procesión y que habría aún más procesiones. Serían ya las siete de la noche y en la oscuridad del recinto se escuchaba la voz de María la Flaca quien relataba los sucesos tal y como se los había contado la Tuerta. Así supieron que las familias ricas donaron grandes alhajas, incluso diamantes, para asegurar la misericordia del Santísimo. Reunidas estaban María la Gorda, quien se ocupaba de la limpieza de las celdas y de las habitaciones de las Madres Superiores; María Piedad, la cocinera; Teresa, otra de las criadas que trabajaba en la huerta; Caimana, una negra alta y fortachona, a quien las monjas le encomendaban labores propias de los hombres como cortar árboles, arreglar muebles, mover cosas pesadas y llevar mandados y mensajes importantes; las dos Soledades, mellizas idénticas, quienes se ocupaban del cuidado de las niñas de familia que vivían y se educaban en el convento.

—Récnle mucho al Santísimo porque nos esperan días malos—la voz de María la Flaca resonaba fuerte—La Tuerta me lo ha dicho, y ustedes saben que la Tuerta trata a todas las criadas de todas las familias y a los criados de todos los conventos, y que sabe de todo y de todos. Por Dios bendito, que no me deja mentir, el pirata llamado Morgan, el peor de todos los piratas, está camino a la ciudad, eso ya lo sabemos todas, pero lo que no saben es que ya algunos señores y religiosos se aprestan a partir hacia Lima pues no confían en que el Gobernador pueda detenerlo.

Algunas se persignaron, una de las Soledades dejó escapar un grito. La Flaca continuó.

—Las monjas están planeando irse y nos repartirán entre las familias que han donado dinero al convento. La Gorda no me deja mentir pues ya ha empacado muchas cosas importantes, documentos así como joyas.

—Es verdad—dijo María la Gorda con voz apagada.

No le había contado a nadie pues las monjas se lo tenían estrictamente prohibido.

—De todas nosotras se llevarán sólo a una criada para asistirles en el viaje y lo más probable es que se lleven a una de las Soledades pues son muy jóvenes, son esclavas nacidas en suelo español y como fueron criadas por las monjas son dóciles y hablan bien el castellano. Parten el lunes.

Las mujeres se sintieron presas de la desazón. Las gemelas se abrazaron llorando. María la Gorda se preguntaba a qué casa la enviarían, pues las monjas habían sido amables con ella, pero sabía que no todas las patronas eran así. María Piedad inmediatamente pensó en Juan, un negro muletero con quien tenía ya cierta relación. Bien podría aprovechar la oportunidad para fugarse con él de una vez por todas. La Caimana sintió una ira enorme y una gran impotencia. A pesar de su gran fuerza física, era poco o nada lo que podía hacer para cambiar las cosas. Quizás podía unirse a los cimarrones. Teresa nunca había vivido con otras personas que no fueran las monjas, confiaba en que estas la ubicarían en un buen hogar, ellas no la iban a abandonar así por así. Sintió miedo, un miedo terrible, un miedo al que no podía poner nombre, pero que lo podía sentir como un hormigueo en el estómago, una inquietud en sus manos, un dolor de cabeza, la voz que salía angustiada de su garganta. A partir de ese día nadie en convento tuvo paz. Faltaba una semana para el lunes.

La voz se corrió rápidamente y las monjas ya no disimularon sus preparativos. Algunas de las niñas que vivían con las monjas fueron enviadas de regreso a sus familias. La primera criada en ser trasladada fue María la Gorda quien fue enviada a trabajar al Hospital San Juan de Dios. Partió casi de madrugada. Sólo tuvieron tiempo de darle un

abrazo y verla desaparecer por la puerta, antes de que una de las monjas con voz cortante las dispersara.

Al marcharse la Gorda la servidumbre se sumió en una melancolía colectiva. Las tareas se hacían con desgano y lentitud, pero los días pasaban veloces. A algunos les dio por recordar cómo llegaron a Panamá. Otros, los esclavos más viejos, rememoraron el terremoto de cuarenta años atrás: si habían sobrevivido a eso, también sobrevivirían a los ingleses. Mercedes los escuchaba a la hora del almuerzo, sin decir palabra. No deseaba ir a ningún lado. No deseaba fugarse, ni hallar a los cimarrones, ni internarse en Malambo con algunos de los boteros o aguateros, tampoco deseaba servir en algún otro lugar. Quizás podría de alguna manera esconderse en el convento y los ingleses no la encontrarían. Las monjas se molestaron terriblemente cuando la Caimana y María Piedad desaparecieron el mismo día, dos días después de la partida de María la Gorda. Esto puso en aprietos al resto, pues fueron interrogadas hasta el hartazgo por las monjas. Ninguna pudo dar mayores explicaciones del paradero de las fugadas.

La Caimana era una mujer fuerte y se sentía capaz de llegar al palenque. En compañía de dos hombres, Matías y José, se había internado en Pierdevidas durante el día y a medianoche partieron hacia el Atlántico. Ella sí recordaba el viaje de llegada a estas tierras. Había sido separada de sus hijos y de su hombre, encadenada por los portugueses, vejada y torturada, vendida en la Feria de Portobelo, traída hasta la Casa de los Genoveses, vendida nuevamente por su dueño a las monjas, luego del terremoto de 1621. No le temía a la jungla, la había caminado desde Portobelo hasta Panamá. No temía a los caimanes, los había agarrado con sus propias manos en la playa, cerca del Matadero, de ahí su nombre, y de eso eran testigos varios niños y un soldado. No le temía a los españoles, veía cierta justicia en el hecho de que ahora vivieran en carne propia lo que ella había vivido, que otros llegaran y se llevaran tu casa, tu familia, tu dignidad, hasta convertirte en una sombra de lo que habías sido. No le temía a ninguna deidad ni a ninguna deidad culpaba o endilgaba sus actos, pues en su mente no existían, sólo existían el sol, la luna, la selva, y la fuerza de sus brazos para sobrevivir. Debían ser cuidadosos al internarse en la selva, pues ahora con los ingleses en camino, los españoles enviaban patrullas para vigilar los movimientos de los mismos. No sería conveniente toparse con un grupo de soldados. Matías y José le contaban de la vida en el palenque. Los africanos eran sus propios amos y señores. Debían acatar ciertas reglas para vivir en paz, pero en general la vida era pacífica, podría construir su propia choza y cultivar la tierra; el sonido del mar se oía en el pueblo noche y día; se tocaba tambor y se bailaba sin prohibiciones ni líos; se pescaba en grandes cantidades. Esa vida idílica pintada por Matías y José le daba sustento a su espíritu sediento de justicia, le hacía olvidar las molestias del camino: la falta de alimentos que les obligaba a cazar lo que podían y comer de los frutos que encontraban, el calor sofocante y la incertidumbre.

María Piedad había conocido a Juan, el muletero, una tarde que se demoró más de lo acostumbrado en la ermita de Santa Ana, la cual quedaba más allá del puente del Rey, cerca de los barrios de los criados y esclavos. Acabada la misa, la gente se congregaba en pequeños grupos para compartir sin prisas. Mientras escuchaba la misa, sin entender nada, pues era en latín, se complacía en observar a los hombres a su antojo, sobretodo porque no estaban ni las monjas ni las criadas necias que le interrumpían sus conversaciones con los aguateros y mandaderos, las pocas veces que podía hablar con alguno. Aunque el convento tenía su propia iglesia, la cual las monjas, con mucho orgullo, estaban remodelando con piedras, por si acaso se diese otro temblor quedara en pie, ella prefería ir a la ermita y nadie le ponía objeción. Contentos estaban todos con su cocina, ya ella lo sabía, y no había plato



que le solicitasen que ella no supiese preparar, para el beneplácito de las religiosas, quienes a veces, con la excusa de la visita de importantes señores, le encomendaban banquetes dignos del Gobernador. A Juan lo había conocido hacía un año y como marido y mujer solamente habían podido estar un par de veces. Él había prometido ahorrar para comprarla a las monjas pero estas le habían dicho claramente que cocinera como ella no habían dos y no estaban dispuestas a cederla para que fuera a amancebarse con un negro. Solamente el día anterior a su fuga, había tenido que hacer milagros con lo poco que quedaba en la despensa para confeccionar una cena para un importante señor. Con tanta gente en la ciudad, algunos a punto de marchar y otros viendo como huir, no se podían abastecer como de costumbre. Una de las gemelas había servido la cena y les había contado que el señor Delgado y Osorio era el responsable de llevar a las monjas hasta Lima y que con ellos zarparían algunas familias muy acomodadas. No bien había terminado de limpiar la cocina, María Piedad empezó a hacer en la oscuridad un bulto con sus pocas pertenencias: una muda de ropa, un rosario y un anillo de oro que había encontrado tirado en la calle. El convento albergaba escasos habitantes y las monjas, ocupadas con su inminente viaje, poco cuidado le ponían a la servidumbre restante. Tuvo que ingeniárselas para salir. Una vez fuera del convento, caminó rápidamente, temerosa de encontrarse con algún soldado. Sin embargo, para su buena suerte un grupo de negros aguateros, de regreso a Pierdevidas y que conocían a Juan, pasaban por ahí. El ruidoso grupo la acogió y le prometieron llevarla hasta donde él. Cuando finalmente se encontraron, María Piedad lo abrazó con todas sus fuerzas. El hombre, de brazos enormes por el trabajo diario, la alzó como si no pesara nada, riendo estruendosamente. El viaje no había concluido, debían ir a Pacora, pueblo donde había muchos negros viviendo libres y donde no llegaría la gente del tal Morgan. Poco después un grupo partía hacia Pacora con la esperanza guiándoles los pies cansados. El hijo que María Piedad llevaba en el vientre nacería libre.

Con la partida de María la Gorda, María Piedad y la Caimana, las pocas criadas que quedaban en el convento no se daban abasto para las últimas disposiciones de las religiosas. Había mucho que guardar, repartir, cambiar y deshacer. Faltaban sólo dos días para la partida. Las monjas serían llevadas en bote hasta la isla de Taboga de donde saldría la nave, el galeón Trinidad. Las gemelas fueron informadas que también viajarían. A última hora la Madre Superiora no había tenido la fuerza de separarlas pues las había criado desde muy pequeñas y las vio crecer juntas. La ciudad también vivía un momento febril con noticias de la inminente llegada de los ingleses quienes, aunque no habían encontrado comida en el camino, lograron sobrevivir. El día de la partida fueron al muelle Teresa, la Flaca y Mercedes para despedirse y ayudar a las monjas y a las gemelas con sus enseres. Junto a ellas, otros esclavos y criados ayudaban a nobles damas y caballeros con sus pertenencias a subirse a sus respectivos botes. El día amaneció muy soleado y el mar en calma, el viaje hasta Taboga sería tranquilo. Vieron alejarse a los señores y a las monjas hasta que fueron sólo una sombra borrosa en la lejanía. Se decía que aquellos se iban por cuidar su dinero, pero que los toros bravíos y los indios flecheros, al igual que los destacamentos, harían todo lo necesario para salvaguardar la vida de los ciudadanos.

Al regresar al convento luego de despedir a las monjas, Mercedes, María la flaca y Teresa quedaron impresionadas del silencio reinante en el antes bullicioso complejo. Cenaron temprano, a las cinco, y se tomaron la libertad de invitar a una criada llamada Perea, quien servía a una de las familias que habitaba en la Plaza Mayor para informarse mejor de las cosas. Las cuatro se sentaron en el comedor que usaban las monjas con los mejores platos y cubiertos de plata. También hallaron un vino que la Madre Superiora solía

esconder en la despensa. En el salón el aire era pesado. Sorbieron lentamente y luego con avidez una sopa hecha con un poquito de todo lo que habían encontrado: pedazos de pollo, otoo, ñame, yuca, cilantro y pedazos de maíz, también tenía grasa de cerdo. Acabaron la sopa en silencio. Luego la Flaca abrió el vino y le sirvió una copa a cada una. Perea se tomó el líquido de una sola sentada y aquello fue como abrir la llave de agua del aljibe del convento.

—El ama ha estado llorando toda la noche, el marido la mandaba a callar, pero fue por gusto. Los niños, tan chiquitos, por suerte dormían, no saben los muy tontitos lo que les espera. Ay, pero los que no han tenido dinero para largarse en barco ya tiemblan de temor por sus pertenencias. Los hombres de Morgan son malos. Pero no digo malos como el ladrón que atraparon antes de la misa de Navidad en el Convento de la Merced robando unas copas de plata. ¡No! Malos de matar, violar, torturar, destruir, robar, disparar. Son franceses e ingleses contratados para estos menesteres. Y nuestro gran gobernador cree que con su ejército de confitura, estas son las palabras de mi amo, que con ese ejército de mentira va a poder dar la talla. Sin embargo, hay quienes piensan que como los ingleses vienen hambrientos y débiles y hasta enfermos de las fiebres que aquí dan cuando le echen los toros, santo remedio. Yo, ustedes, me largo de esta ciudad cuanto antes. En mi caso, ni modo, mis amos me buscarían bajo las mismas piedras, pero a ustedes, ¿quién las va a mandar a buscar? Se dice que los piratas pasaron por Santa Catalina y no dejaron nada en pie, que el fuerte de San Lorenzo está hecho cenizas, un montón de piedras desmoronadas luego de que lo incendiaran. Si no los pudieron parar a la entrada, ahora me dirán que los van a detener a la salida.

Perea se reía mientras se tomaba ya la tercera copa de vino y volvía a la carga:

—Es como cuando un hombre se te monta encima, ¿ahí es que vas a impedir que te monte, ah? ¿Cuándo ya te tiene contra el piso? Porque estamos contra el piso, sépanlo ya mismito.

Las risotadas de Perea llenaban todo el salón. La sacaron a empujones del convento, pues exigía más vino. Se miraron unas a otras a la luz del candil luego de cerrar la puerta. La primera que habló fue María la Flaca.

—Yo no me voy—dijo con firmeza.

—Nosotras tampoco—respondieron las otras.

Llegó el día en que los ingleses tomaron la ciudad, el miércoles 28 de enero de 1671. De no haber sido por el ataque de Morgan, muchos habrían dicho que era el día más hermoso de la estación seca. El gobernador en persona dirigió la contienda contra los ingleses en Matasnillos, pero el puñado de españoles, indios, negros, perros y toros resultaron insuficientes para los ojos inyectados de odio, hambre, y avaricia de los piratas. Pronto Don Juan Pérez de Guzmán ordenaba la retirada de sus tropas retornando a todo galope a la ciudad, donde dio la orden de evacuar y de incendiar, para no dejar nada a los ingleses, partiendo rápidamente hacia Natá. Los que pudieron corrieron hacia las afueras en sus caballos. Ella y las otras dos criadas cerraron como pudieron todas las puertas del convento. Era un edificio enorme y tenía muchas salidas. Por un momento hubo un silencio tan grande en la ciudad que parecía que a pleno día fuera medianoche. ¡Y de pronto el estallido! La ciudad se convirtió en un infierno. Desde el huerto podían ver como todo a su alrededor era consumido por las llamas, hasta ellas llegaba el ruido de las carretas, el galope de caballos que relinchaban, mujeres, hombres y niños que gritaban su desgracia, los estertores en aquella lengua bárbara de los piratas. Se quedaron sentadas sin moverse en unos bancos de madera frente al huerto. Sentían una paz enorme al saber que morirían así:

asfixiadas en el único lugar que conocían como su hogar. El calor se hacía insoportable y la humareda era espesa. Los gritos en la ciudad se hacían cada vez mayores, en algunos casos desgarradores. Hablaron de las que habían escapado, ¿qué habría sido de ellas? No llegarían a enterarse de que María Piedad llegó hasta Pacora pero había abortado en el camino y que la Caimana, luego de enterrar a sus dos compañeros de viaje quienes fueron víctimas, uno de las fiebres y otro, de una picada de víbora, un día cayó de rodillas con los ojos anegados de lágrimas frente al mar Caribe que se extendía ante sus ojos como una diosa sonriente mientras que la gente del palenque salía a recibirla.

Mercedes abrazó primero a Teresa. Habían sido compañeras de labores en la huerta desde pequeñas, habían pasado las mismas humillaciones, reído las mismas penas, atesorado las pequeñas alegrías y ahora, juntas, enfrentaban la misma muerte. Con lágrimas en los ojos abrazaron a María la Flaca quien tenía un rostro muy sereno. Se tomaron las tres de las manos. La primera en perder el conocimiento por el humo fue Teresa y luego la Flaca. Mercedes esperaba con ansias el momento en que pudiese cruzar el umbral entre los vivos y muertos. Todo lo que había vivido le parecía ahora un simple viaje cuyos dolores y tribulaciones eran un recuerdo casi borroso.

La puerta del convento fue tumbada a mazazos. El lugar se fue haciendo cada vez más caliente y sofocante pues el techo y los edificios circundantes ardían en llamas. Un hombre entró al recinto y tomó a Mercedes por la cintura sorpresivamente. No podía soltarse, no podía ver el rostro de quien la halaba con fuerza. Sin pensarlo empezó a tantear y haló un sable que el hombre llevaba amarrado en su cinturón. Con sus propias manos y con todas las fuerzas de las que era capaz se enterró el sable. El hombre al fin la soltaba y la dejaba caer. Mientras la vida se le escapaba pudo ver la cara del pirata, una cara de sorpresa. Luego todo fue oscuridad.

El pirata miraba con visible alteración a la mujer tirada en el suelo y de cuya boca brotaba sangre. Fue hacia las otras mujeres y las sacudió, pero no presentaban pulso. Las tres estaban muertas. Salió del Convento de la Concepción y se tropezó con un compañero que corría hacia el Convento de la Merced.

—¡Ni te acerques a la Plaza Mayor, Exquemeling, aquello es un verdadero infierno!—le gritó el otro sin dejar de correr.

"¿Tal era el odio a la esclavitud que preferían morir de esa manera?" A John Exquemeling todavía le parecía sostener a la mujer por su pequeña cintura. Ahora ya no le parecía una mujer sino un pajarillo que quería alzar vuelo. Él, que había visto morir a tantos y no le había temblado la mano al tener que abrir una pierna, coser un ojo o amputar de manera definitiva un miembro, ahora le enternecía ver a una negra darse muerte por su propia mano, antes que rendirse. ¿O quitarse la vida era rendirse? Con esos pensamientos vagó por las calles, registrando lo que hacían los otros con minucioso detalle. Escribiría, luego de muchas tribulaciones para regresar a su Europa natal, un libro denominado *Los bucaneros de América*. Omitiría el detalle del convento, prefirió dejarlo como un recuerdo personal.

Tres semanas se quedaron los hombres de Morgan en la ciudad y no muy contentos. Los prodigiosos tesoros que habían imaginado, imaginación que había sostenido al grupo en marcha a pesar de los obstáculos, no aparecieron. Los españoles se habían dado a la tarea de esconder el dinero y más de uno había logrado escapar a buen recaudo rumbo al Perú. Revisaron la ciudad y no dejaron una piedra sin levantar, ni un escombros sin explorar. Del voraz incendio sólo quedó en pie el convento de la Merced, el cual los piratas convirtieron en su cuartel general. Los piratas, por órdenes de Morgan, navegaron el

Pacífico hacia las islas cercanas de Perico, Naos y Taboga a ver si encontraban algo más. Agarraron a cuanto esclavo pudieron para venderlos en Jamaica. Sin embargo, el mayor beneficio serían los rescates pagados por casi la mitad de los españoles prisioneros que llevaron consigo al dejar la ciudad. Poco fue lo que ganaron los piratas por lo que Morgan abandonó a su tripulación antes de que se rebelase. Pero esa, es otra historia.

## **TEXT 10**

**“The Voyage” by Melanie Taylor Herrera, translated by Christina Vega-Westhoff  
Published in *Asymptote*, July 2013**

Some of the oldest women would describe the voyage in all its details: the nauseating smell of feces, urine, blood and spoiled food; the heartrending cries of those who died suffering the most terrible pains while tied to their shackles; the cry of infants and children, sometimes still trying to suck from the breast of a mother already dead; the conversations shouted from one end of the boat to the other among the few who could understand each other. The women who had survived the ship's crossing spoke of it rarely, as they seldom had the opportunity to meet. They had been scattered among different monasteries and houses where they were kept busy with the garden, the kitchen, the laundry, and the cleaning in general. Today was an exception; the entire city was in attendance at the procession: the civil servants of the Crown, the wealthy and poor families, the religious order and the nuns, the servants, the traders passing through the city, even the enslaved and free blacks who lived in Malambo and Pierdevidas joined in. She walked between the female servants and a few of the free black women who made use of the opportunity to speak with ease of things past and present and of the future attack so endlessly discussed by the men and the Church. There was so much to talk about in so little time that it was difficult for her to concentrate on just one conversation. The elderly woman at her side insisted on talking to her about the voyage between the homeland and this new city, while all she really wanted to know was what would happen if the English arrived.

The procession left from the Plaza Mayor, opposite the Cathedral, and proceeded down the Calle de la Empedrada. Leading the procession was Don Juan Pérez de Guzmán himself, accompanied by soldiers carrying the image of the Immaculate Conception of María. The city bustled, full of people and life; with the attack in embryo, the Spanish had sent for replacements from other towns like Natá and Villa de los Santos and even for the *flecheros*, the Indian militiamen, and their arrival had aroused great curiosity, though she hadn't been able to see them, enclosed as she was most of the time inside the convent. Also at the front, along with the governor, were the highest dignitaries of the city's religious communities and the gentlemen from the wealthiest families. Señor Terín would be there, without a doubt. Following in his steps were the communities' monks and priests and a few nuns. Behind them were the Spanish families, specifically the women and their domestic servants, ready to assist the Spanish women were they to faint or need water during the walk. Farther behind was her group: the servants of the convents and churches and of the less affluent families, the free black men and women, and the Indians, mixed in a multicolored and absurd whole, whose conversations united with the religious chants at the head of the procession. A young monk with a serious expression on his face carried the holy

sacrament on high next to the image of the Conception, and watched Father Sancho Pardo de Andrade y Fiegueroa, head of the Isthmus's Diocese, through the corner of his eye.

She rarely left the Convent of the Conception. She had arrived at an early age and many years had already passed since then. Despite all that time, she still remembered her arrival at the hands of a man whom the nun had received at the door. The nun, thoroughly covered from head to toe, looked her over with curiosity, read from a paper, and ordered her to follow. The nun took her to an enormous kitchen where numerous black women were occupied in various tasks. "You have a new assistant," the nun said authoritatively before disappearing. One of the women approached her with a mocking smile.

"Look at the size of the assistant the women are sending us—she barely reaches the table! Does she speak Castilian? Because if she's fresh off the boat..."

The kitchen exploded in laughter.

"Leave her alone, María," cried out one of the women, the eldest, a grey-haired black woman with a face so kind the girl ran to be near her. The woman embraced her sweetly and whispered something in her ear in a language she didn't understand, as she had been born in the Colonies and separated from her mother at an early age, and so only understood Castilian.

"We'll call her Candela, so she gets a taste for the stove," yelled María.

"No," said the elder, "we'll call her Mercedes."

Mercedes learned to tend the garden and to help in the kitchen, but they didn't send her out to the market or to run errands. The nuns had trusted servants for those tasks. One of them was María, called Skinny María, to distinguish her from another maid, Fat María. Skinny was often sent to the market to buy the meat and beans. There, a free black woman known as One-Eye, had recounted all the details of the procession to her and said there would be even more processions to come. By seven at night in the dark of the premises, the voice of Skinny María could be heard relaying the events exactly as One-Eye had. That is how they found out the rich families donated magnificent jewels, even diamonds, to ensure the Most Holy's mercy. Gathered together were Fat María, responsible for cleaning the cells and rooms of the Mother Superiors; María Pieta, the cook; Teresa, another maid who worked in the garden; Caimana, a tall, well-built black woman whom the nuns entrusted with work usually reserved for men, like cutting trees, repairing furniture, moving heavy things, and carrying packages and important messages; and the two Soledads, identical twins who looked after the girls, children from prominent families who lived and were educated in the convent.

"Pray, pray, pray to the Santísimo because bad days are coming," resounded the voice of Skinny María, "One-Eye told me so and you all know that she has contact with the maids of every family and all the servants of the convent, and that she knows about everything and everybody. By our Blessed God, who keeps me from lying, the pirate named Morgan, the worst of all pirates, is heading towards the city; we all know it, but what you all don't know is that some of the señores and religious order are preparing to leave for Lima because they don't trust that the governor can stop him."

Some made the sign of the cross, and a cry escaped from one of the Soledades. Skinny continued.

"The nuns are planning to leave and they'll divide us among the families that have donated money to the convent. Fat María won't let me lie either; she's already packed many important things, from documents to jewels."

"It's true," said Fat María, her voice fading.



She hadn't told anyone as the nuns had strictly forbidden it.

"They'll only take one of us to help with the trip and most likely they'll take one of the Soledades since they're so young and were born slaves on Spanish soil. And since the nuns raised them, they're docile and speak Castilian well. They leave on Monday."

The women were seized by anxiety. The twins embraced each other crying. Fat María wondered which house she would be sent to; the nuns had been kind to her, and she knew that not all masters would be like them. María Pieta immediately thought of Juan, a black muleteer with whom she already shared a special relationship. She could easily use the opportunity to escape with him once and for all. Caimana felt tremendous rage and impotence. Even with her great physical strength, there was little to nothing she could do to change things. Perhaps she could join the Cimarrons, the escaped slaves. Teresa had only ever lived with the nuns, and she had faith they would place her in a good home; they wouldn't abandon her just like that. She felt fear, terrible fear, fear she couldn't name, but could feel like a tingling in her stomach, a restlessness in her hands, a headache, the anguished voice that escaped from her throat. From then on, no one in the convent was at peace. Monday was a week away.

Word spread quickly and the nuns no longer disguised their preparations. Some of the girls who lived with the nuns were sent back to their families. The first of the servants to be transferred was Fat María, who was sent to work at the Hospital San Juan de Dios. She left just before dawn. They only had time to hug her and watch her disappear out the door before a nun's sharp voice dispersed them.

With Fat María's departure, the servants sunk into a collective melancholy. They did their work slowly and indifferently, but the days flew by. Some remembered how they arrived in Panama. Others, the oldest slaves, recalled the earthquake of forty years back: if they had survived the earthquake, they could survive the English. Mercedes listened to them through lunch, saying nothing. She didn't want to go anywhere. She didn't want to escape, or find the runaways, or cross through to Malambo with a few of the boatmen or water carriers; she didn't want to be made to serve elsewhere either. Perhaps she could somehow hide in the convent and the English wouldn't find her. The nuns were terribly upset when Caimana and María Pieta disappeared on the same day, two days after the departure of Fat María. This put the rest of them in a predicament; the nuns interrogated them to exhaustion. None of the maids could offer information about the fugitives' whereabouts.

Caimana was a strong woman and she felt capable of arriving at the Cimarron settlement, the *palenque*. In the company of two men, Matias and José, she had penetrated into Pierdevidas by day and at midnight had left for the Atlantic. She remembered the voyage, her arrival to these lands. She had been separated from her children and her beloved, chained by the Portuguese, humiliated and tortured, sold in the Portobelo Fair, brought to the House of the Genoese, and after the earthquake of 1621, sold again by her owner to the nuns. She wasn't afraid of the jungle; she had walked through it from Portobelo to Panama. She wasn't afraid of the caimans; she had grabbed them with her own hands at the beach near Matadero, hence her name. Various children and a soldier had witnessed it. She wasn't afraid of the Spanish; she saw a certain justice that they would now suffer in their own flesh what she had lived, that others would arrive and take your house, your family, your dignity, until they had turned you into a shadow of what you had been. She wasn't afraid of any deity nor did she blame any deity, as in her mind they didn't exist; only the sun, moon, jungle, and the strength of her arms, which she used to survive, existed.

They had to be careful about going into the jungle; now that the English were en route, the Spanish sent patrols to observe their movements. It would be inopportune to stumble upon a group of soldiers. Matias and José told her about life in the *palenque*. The Africans were their own masters and lords. They had to respect certain rules to live in peace, but in general life was tranquil; they could build their own huts and farm the land; you could hear the sound of the ocean in the village day and night; they played the drums, danced without limitations or fuss, and they caught great quantities of fish. This idyllic life Matias and José depicted gave sustenance to her spirit, which thirsted for justice, and helped her to forget the difficulties of the road; the lack of food, which forced them to hunt what they could and to eat the fruits they found; the suffocating heat, and the uncertainty of it all.

María Pieta had met Juan, the muleteer, one afternoon when she had lingered more than usual at the chapel of Santa Ana, located past the El Rey bridge, near the servants and slaves' neighborhoods. After mass, people congregated in small groups to converse at leisure. As she listened to mass, not understanding a thing, as it was in Latin, she reveled in observing the men as she pleased, most of all because the annoying nuns and servants who would interrupt her conversations with the water carriers and the messengers, the precious few times she found to speak with one, weren't there. Even though the convent had its own church, which the nuns were proudly remodeling with stones, so that if another earthquake struck, it would still stand tall, she preferred to visit the chapel and no one objected. They were all happy with her cooking, as she well knew, and there wasn't a dish they could ask for that she couldn't prepare for the pleasure of the nuns, who at times, with the excuse of important visitors, asked her to prepare banquets worthy of the Governor. She had met Juan about a year before, but they had only been together as man and wife a few times. He had promised to save money so he could buy her from the nuns, but they had very clearly told him that they'd never find a cook like her and that they weren't prepared to relinquish her just so that she could live with a black man. The very day before her flight, she'd had to work miracles with the little that remained in the pantry to prepare a dinner for a very important señor. With so many people in the city, some about to leave and others preparing their escape, they couldn't stock up as much as usual. One of the twins had served the dinner and had told them that Señor Delgado y Osorio was the one responsible for taking the nuns to Lima and that some very wealthy families would set sail with them. María Pieta had barely finished cleaning the kitchen when she started to prepare a parcel of her few belongings in the dark: a change of clothes, a rosary, and a gold ring she had found in the street. The convent now housed only a few, and the nuns, busy with their imminent departure, paid little attention to the remaining servants. She had to devise a way past them to leave. As soon as she was outside the convent, she walked quickly, fearing she would come across a soldier. As luck would have it, a group of black water carriers on return from Pierdevidas, who knew Juan, passed by. The loud group took her in and promised to take her to him. When the two finally met, María Pieta embraced him with all she had. The man picked her up, with arms enormous from working daily, as if she weighed nothing, laughing uproariously. The trip wasn't over, they needed to go to Pacora, a village where many black men and women lived free and where people like Morgan wouldn't venture. Not long after, the group left for Pacora, hope guiding their tired feet. The son that María Pieta carried in her womb would be born free.

With the departure of Fat María, María Pieta, and Caimana, the few maids left in the convent couldn't keep up with the nuns' last orders. There was so much to store, divide, change, and undo. There were only two days left until their departure. The nuns would be

taken by rowboat to the island of Taboga, where they'd leave in a ship, the Trinidad Galleon. The twins were informed that they would also be accompanying them. At the last moment, the Mother Superior hadn't had the strength to separate them; she had raised them from a very young age and had watched them grow together. The city was feverish with news of the imminent arrival of the English, who had managed to survive even though they hadn't found food on the voyage. On the day of the departure, Teresa, Skinny, and Mercedes went to the dock to help the nuns and the twins with their belongings and to see them off. Alongside them were other slaves and servants who helped the noble ladies and gentlemen with their belongings as they got into their respective boats. The day broke brightly and the ocean was calm; the trip to Taboga would be tranquil. They watched as the señoras and nuns floated away until they were only a faint shadow in the distance. It was said that they were leaving to safeguard their money, and that the wild bulls and the Indian *flecheros*, together with the detachments, would do all that was necessary to secure the lives of the city dwellers.

Returning to the convent after seeing off the nuns, Mercedes, Skinny María, and Teresa were impressed by the silence that reigned in what had once been a bustling complex. They dined early, at five, and took the liberty of inviting a servant named Perea, who served one of the families living in the Plaza Mayor, in order to learn more about what was happening. The four sat down in the dining room the nuns normally used with the best plates and silverware. They also found wine that the Mother Superior usually hid in the pantry. The air in the room was heavy. They slurped slowly and then eagerly a soup made of bits and pieces of everything they had found: pieces of chicken, *otoe*, yam, yucca, cilantro, pieces of maíz, and also pork fat. They finished the soup in silence. Later Skinny opened the wine and served everyone a glass. Perea drank the liquid in one gulp and it was like turning on the convent's cistern faucet.

"The lady of the house has been crying all night. Her husband demands she be quiet, but in vain. Luckily the children, so little, were fast asleep. The foolish things don't know what's in store for them. Ay, but those who don't have money to leave by boat now shake with fear for their belongings. Morgan's men are evil. And I don't mean evil like the thief caught in the Convent of the Mercy before Christmas mass stealing silver goblets. No! Evil like they kill, rape, torture, destroy, steal, and shoot. They are Frenchmen and Englishmen who've been hired for these tasks. And our great governor believes that with his armed forces of jelly, these are my master's words, that with this fake army of reserves, he's going to be able to take them. Even still, there are those who believe that because the English are hungry and weak and even sick with the fevers that are found here, when the Spanish release the bulls, it'll be a miracle cure-all. I'd leave the city before then if I were you. In my case, there's nothing that can be done, my masters will even look for me beneath stones, but you all, who will they send to look for you? They say the pirates went through Santa Catalina and left nothing standing, that Fort San Lorenzo has been turned to ashes, nothing but a mountain of crumbling rocks after they burned it. They couldn't stop them at the entrance, so now they'll say they'll stop them at the exit."

Perea laughed as she drank what was by then her third glass of wine and returned to the charge: "It's like when a man's mounted above you, is that when you're going to stop him from mounting you, eh? When he already has you against the floor? Because, understand this now, we're against the floor."



Perea's bursts of laughter filled the hall. They shoved her out of the convent when she kept asking for more wine. After shutting the door, they looked at one another by candlelight. The first to speak was Skinny María.

"I'm not going," she said firmly.

"Neither are we," the others responded.

The day that the English took the city arrived, Wednesday, January 28, 1671. If not for Morgan's attack, many would have said that it was the most beautiful day of the dry season. The governor himself led the reserves against the English in Matasnillos, but the push of the Spanish, Indians, Blacks, dogs, and bulls was not enough against the pirates whose eyes were infused with avarice, hunger, and hatred. Soon Don Juan Pérez de Guzmán ordered his troops to retreat at full gallop to the city, where he gave the order to evacuate and to burn everything, in order to leave nothing to the English, and then took off rapidly for Natá. Those who could ran to the outskirts on their horses. Mercedes and the other two servants closed the doors of the convent as well as they could. It was a huge building with many exits. For a moment there was a silence in the city so great that it seemed midnight in the midst of full day. And suddenly the explosion! The city was turned into hell. From the garden they could see how everything around them was consumed by the flames; the sound of the carts, the galloping of the neighing horses, the screams of men, women, and children, and the death rattle in the pirates' barbaric language reached them. They sat unmoving on the wooden seats in front of the garden. They felt an enormous peace knowing they would die like this: asphyxiated in the only place they had known as home. The heat was unbearable, and the smoke thick. The city's cries became louder each time, in some cases heartbreaking. They spoke of those who had escaped; what would have happened to them? They would never find out that María Pieta made it to Pacora but had a miscarriage on the road and that Caimana, after burying her two travel companions, one who fell victim to the fevers and the other to a snakebite, one day fell on her knees, her eyes flooding with tears before the Caribbean Sea that extended before her like a smiling goddess as the people of the *Palenque* came out to greet her.

Mercedes first hugged Teresa. They had been workmates in the garden since they were young; they had been through the same humiliations, laughed through the same hardships, treasured the same small happinesses and now, together, they faced the same death. With tears in their eyes they hugged Skinny María, whose face looked serene. The three held hands. The first to lose consciousness from the smoke was Teresa and later Skinny. Mercedes waited anxiously for the moment she could cross the threshold between the living and the dead. All that she had lived now seemed to her a simple voyage whose pains and tribulations were a vaguely blurry memory.

Mallets knocked down the door to the convent. The place grew hotter and more suffocating each minute, as the roof and surrounding buildings burned in flames. A man entered the enclosure and unexpectedly grabbed Mercedes by the waist. She couldn't break free; she couldn't see the face of the man who pulled her forcefully. Without thinking she began to feel for the saber secured to the man's belt and then pulled. With her own hands and with all of the strength she could muster, she buried the saber in her body. The man finally let go, let her fall. As her life left her, she could see the pirate's face, his astonishment. Then darkness.

The pirate, visibly disturbed, looked at the woman on the floor, blood spurting from her mouth. He went to the other women and shook them, but they had no pulse. The three

women were dead. He left the Convent of the Conception and ran into his companion who was running towards the Convent of Mercy.

"Don't even go near the Plaza Mayor, Exquemiling, it's a true hell!" his companion yelled without stopping his run.

"They hated slavery so much that they preferred to die like this?" To John Exquemeling it still seemed he held the woman by her small waist. Now she didn't seem like a woman but a little bird wanting to take flight. He who had seen too many die and whose hand hadn't shook while slicing a leg, sewing an eye, or amputating a limb, now softened seeing a black woman die at her own hand, before giving herself up. Or was ending your life giving up? With these thoughts he roamed the streets, registering what the others did with meticulous detail. He would write, after many difficulties on the return to his native Europe, a popular book, *The Buccaneers of America*. He would omit the detail of the convent, preferring to keep it as a personal memory.

Morgan's men stayed in the city for three weeks, and they were not content. The incredible treasures they had imagined, which had sustained the group in its travels in spite of the obstacles, were nowhere to be seen. The Spanish had hidden their money well and more than one Spaniard had managed to escape with a good sum to Peru. The pirates searched the city, leaving no stone unturned, nor any rubble unexplored. After the ravenous fire, only the Convent of Mercy was left standing, which the pirates made into their general barracks. Morgan ordered the pirates to navigate the Pacific toward the nearby islands Perico, Naos, and Taboga to see if they could find something more. They grabbed as many slaves as they could to then sell in Jamaica. Yet, the greatest profit was the paid ransom of almost half of the Spanish prisoners who they took with them when they left the city. The pirates gained very little and so Morgan abandoned his crew before they rebelled. But that's another story.

## TEXT 11

**"El Cíclope" by Alejandro Zambra**

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Primero hay que vivir, decía Claudia, y era difícil no estar de acuerdo: antes de escribir había que vivir las historias, las aventuras. A mí no me interesaba, por entonces, contar historias. A ella sí, es decir no, no todavía; quería vivir las historias que años o décadas después, en un incierto y sosegado futuro, contaría. Claudia era cortazariana a más no poder, aunque su primera aproximación a Cortázar fue, en realidad, un desengaño: al llegar al capítulo 7 de *Rayuela* reconoció, con pavor, el texto que su novio solía recitarle como propio, por lo que rompió con su novio y comenzó, con Cortázar, un romance que tal vez aún perdura. Mi amiga no se llamaba, no se llama Claudia: protejo, por si acaso, su identidad, y la del novio, que entonces era ayudante de cátedra y ahora de seguro da clases sobre Cortázar o sobre intertextualidad en alguna universidad norteamericana.

A esas alturas de 1993 ó 1994, Claudia ya era, sin duda, la protagonista de una novela larga, bella y compleja, digna de Cortázar o de Kerouac o de cualquiera que se atreviera a seguir su vida rápida. La vida de los demás, la vida de nosotros, en cambio, cabía de sobra en una página (y a doble espacio). A los dieciocho años Claudia ya había ido y regresado varias veces: de una ciudad a otra, de un país a otro, de un continente a otro, y también, sobre todo, del dolor a la alegría y de la alegría, de nuevo, al dolor. Llenaba sus

croqueras con lo que yo suponía que eran cuentos o esbozos de cuentos o quizás un diario. Pero la única vez que aceptó leerme algunos fragmentos descubrí, con asombro, que Claudia escribía poemas. Ella no los llamaba poemas, en todo caso, sino anotaciones. La única diferencia real entre esas anotaciones y los textos que en ese tiempo yo escribía era el nivel de impostura: transcribíamos las mismas frases, describíamos las mismas escenas, pero ella las olvidaba o al menos decía olvidarlas, mientras que yo las pasaba en limpio y perdía las horas ensayando títulos y estructuras.

Deberías escribir cuentos o una novela, le dije a Claudia esa tarde de viento helado y cerveza fría. Has vivido mucho, agregué, torpemente. No, respondió, tajante: tú has vivido más, tú has vivido mucho más que yo, y enseguida empezó a relatar mi vida como si leyera, en mi mano, el pasado, el presente y el futuro. Exageraba, como todos los narradores (y como todos los poetas): cualquier anécdota de la niñez se volvía esencial, cada hecho significaba una pérdida o un progreso irreparables. Me reconocí a medias en el protagonista y en los decisivos personajes secundarios (ella misma era, en esa historia, un personaje secundario que poco a poco iba cobrando relevancia). De inmediato quise corresponder a esa novela improvisando la vida de Claudia: hablé de viajes, del difícil retorno a Chile, de la separación de sus padres, y hubiera seguido pero de pronto Claudia me dijo cállate y fue al baño y tardó diez o veinte largos minutos. Regresó a paso lento, encubriendo, apenas, un miedo o una vergüenza que no le conocía. Perdona, me dijo, no sé si me gustaría que alguien escribiera mi vida. Me gustaría contarla yo misma o tal vez no contarla. Nos echamos en el pasto a intercambiar disculpas como si compitiéramos, ahora, en un concurso de buenas maneras. Pero hablábamos, en realidad, un lenguaje privado que ninguno de los dos quería o podía ceder.

Fue entonces cuando me contó lo del capítulo 7 de *Rayuela*. Yo conocía al ayudante y sabía que había sido novio de Claudia, por lo que la historia me pareció aún más cómica, pues me lo imaginaba convertido en el cíclope del que hablaba Cortázar ("y entonces jugamos al cíclope, nos miramos cada vez más de cerca y los ojos se agrandan, se acercan entre sí, se superponen..."). Aguanté la risa hasta que Claudia comenzó una carcajada y me dijo es mentira, y los dos reímos pues sabíamos que no, que era verdad. A mí Cortázar no me gusta tanto, lancé de repente, a pito de nada. ¿Por qué? No sé, no me gusta tanto, repetí, y volvimos a reír, esta vez sin motivo, ya liberados del fantasma de la seriedad.

Sería fácil, ahora, rebatir o confirmar esos lugares comunes: si has vivido mucho escribes novelas, si has vivido poco escribes poemas. Pero no era esa exactamente nuestra discusión, que tampoco era una discusión, al menos no una en que alguien pierde y el otro gana. Queríamos, tal vez, empatar, seguir hablando hasta que el guardia soltara a los perros y tuviéramos que huir, borrachos, saltando la reja celeste. Pero aún no estábamos borrachos y al portero no le importaba si nos íbamos o seguíamos conversando toda la noche.

## TEXT 12

**“The Cyclops” by Alejandro Zambra, translated by Elizabeth Fisherkeller  
Published in *Asymptote*, July 2012**

First one must live, Claudia would say, and it was difficult not to agree: before writing one had to live the stories, the adventures. I wasn't interested, not then, not in telling stories. She was, which is to say she wasn't, not yet; she wanted to live the stories that, years or decades later, in some uncertain and calm future, she would tell. Claudia could not

have been more of a Cortazarian, although her first experience with Cortázar was, in reality, a disappointment: after reading Chapter 7 of *Hopscotch* she realized that her boyfriend used to recite it to her as if it were his own, so she broke up with him and started up with Cortázar, a romance that perhaps still lives. My friend was not called, is not called Claudia: I protect, just in case, her identity, and that of the boyfriend, he was then a graduate assistant and now surely teaches classes about Cortázar or about intertextuality in some North American University.

At the height of 1993 or 1994, Claudia was already, without a doubt, the protagonist of a long novel, beautiful and complex, worthy of Cortázar or of Kerouac or of whoever could follow her quick life. The lives of others, our lives, by contrast, more than fit on one page (double-spaced). At eighteen years old Claudia had already come and gone a few times: from one city to another, from one continent to another, and also, above all else, from pain to happiness and from happiness, again, to pain. She would fill her notebook with what I supposed were stories or sketches of stories or maybe a diary. But the only time that she agreed to read me some fragments I discovered, with amazement, that Claudia wrote poems. She didn't call them poems, in any case, but *annotations*. The only difference between those annotations and the texts I would write was that, at that time, what I wrote was pure posturing: we would transcribe the same phrases, we would describe the same scenes, but she would forget them or would at least say that she forgot them, while I would revise them and spend hours trying out titles and structures.

You should write stories or a novel, I told Claudia that afternoon of freezing wind and cold beer. You've lived a lot, I added clumsily. No, she responded shortly: you've lived more than I have, and right away she starting to tell my life as if it were being read, in my hand, the past, the present and the future. She exaggerated, like all narrators (and as all poets): a childhood anecdote would become essential, each deed meant irreparable losses or progress. I half recognized myself in the protagonist and in the decisive secondary characters (she was one herself, in that story, a secondary character who, little by little, became more relevant). Immediately, I wanted to write something like that improvised novel of hers: I spoke of trips, of the difficult return to Chile, about the separation of her parents, and I would have gone on but soon Claudia said shut up and went to the bathroom and stayed there for ten or twenty long minutes. She returned, walking slowly, covering up, barely, a fear or embarrassment that I didn't know her. Sorry, she said, I don't know if I would like for someone to write about my life. I would want to tell it myself or maybe not tell it. We threw ourselves down on the grass to exchange apologies as if we were competing at it, now, in a good-manners competition. But we would speak, really, in a private language that neither of us wanted to give up.

It was then that she told me about Chapter 7 in *Hopscotch*. I knew the assistant and I knew that he had been Claudia's boyfriend, because of which I found the story to be much more amusing, then I imagined him as the Cyclops that Cortázar talked about ("and so we play the Cyclops, we look at one another closer all the time and our eyes get bigger, then as they get closer, they superimpose..."). I held my smile until Claudia began to laugh and told me it wasn't true, and we both laughed because we knew that no, it was true. I don't like Cortázar so much, I changed all of a sudden, out of nowhere. Why? I don't know, I don't like him that much, I repeated, and we laughed again, this time without a reason, already free from the specter of seriousness.

It would be easy, now, to refute or confirm those common places: if you have lived a lot you write novels, if you have lived a little you write poems. But our argument wasn't

that exactly, neither was it an argument, at least not one in which one loses and the other wins. We wanted, maybe, a tie, to keep talking until the guard let out the hounds and we had to flee, drunk, jumping the pale blue gate. But we still weren't drunk and the doorman didn't care if we went or stayed there talking all night.

### TEXT 13

**“Incomunicado” by Carmen Rioja**

**Published in *Palabras Errantes*, January 2014**

“¿Por qué si el sueño es para eso, para mostrarle al fin la bestia?  
Pero no, entonces el sueño es para que los leopardos  
continúen su espiral interminable...”  
Julio Cortázar, *Un tal Lucas*

Después del terremoto la ciudad parece desierta. Parece que todos hubieran muerto pero la gente se ha escondido debajo del escombros en los cuartos que quedaron, debajo de periódicos, tabloneros, láminas. La gente se esconde en pozos, en cuevas hechas por refrigeradores tirados. Lo difícil es encontrar comida y sobre todo encontrar agua. Puedes pasar hambre -algunos han muerto-, como los que están allá en la terracería, quizás mi madre también murió, no la he visto desde hace muchos días, no sé cuántos.

Ayer tembló durante un minuto tal vez, fue entonces cuando todo quedó como está ahora. Pero ya antes hubo otros desastres, una inundación primero y luego las enfermedades. Podrías pensar que se trata de una película apocalíptica. No es el año 3,000 sino apenas el día de hoy. Yo no entiendo por qué se nos castiga.

Será que somos de la familia de David. Será que no somos, de la familia de David. Dios mismo nos ha repudiado o tal vez olvidó a su pueblo. La gente se muere despacio, muy lentamente, no acaba el martirio. Se duelen por fuera y por dentro con tanta fuerza que casi puedo oír el dolor. Quisiera ayudarles pero yo mismo estoy débil y apenas puedo estar despierto. Si me quedo dormido temo no despertar. Necesitamos salir en busca de otra tierra para sobrevivir. Corre una voz entre los que quedamos dispersos: dicen que saldremos de aquí por la mañana, nos iremos por el desierto para huir de tanta muerte.

Lo que era el centro de la ciudad, ahora es el único lugar en donde todavía se puede encontrar a unos cuantos, son los que han salido de las piedras en busca de agua, de alimento o de noticias. Camino por lo que parece la avenida; todavía hay edificios. Adentro de uno se venden televisores, hay algunos que prefieren cambiar zapatos y alimento por un televisor, y si el comerciante tiene hambre y muchos televisores hará el trueque. Por eso ahora los televisores tienen un valor relativo: mientras que para algunos no valen nada, sino un poco de comida y el agua, para otros son más preciosos todavía que ningún otro objeto. Porque aún hay transmisiones y es la única forma que tenemos de saber lo que está pasando alrededor nuestro, aquí mismo. Nadie entiende qué está pasando y casi nadie quiere hablar. No hay vehículos para salir y por alguna razón nadie ha llegado de afuera con noticias. Estamos incomunicados.

Me paro frente a la vitrina, el televisor está encendido. Es extraño que no se hable de nosotros, ni siquiera para informar del terremoto. Pero en la pantalla sólo se habla del ciclo de reproducción de la mariposa nocturna. Y no hay imágenes de las moscas, de los gusanos encima de la gente, de la basura acumulada de dos meses, no se habla de los



cuerpos, ni de los desaparecidos, no hablan de las ratas ni del hambre que nos hace destriparlas. Me siento a mitad de la calle y espero a que termine el programa, con la esperanza de que lo siguiente sea un noticiero. Me pregunto si el mundo de afuera se terminó, o si nosotros mismos hemos terminado y todavía no lo sabemos. Parece que la extinción del hombre ha llegado, terremotos, inundaciones, enfermedades, desastres naturales que pocos podrán sobrevivir si no es que ninguno. Sigue el televisor, ahora los comerciales: detergente súper activo y biodegradable para materiales sintéticos, luego una marca nueva del fármaco que evita la obesidad, ahora adicionado con un porcentaje de vitaminas antienvjecimiento y un antidepresivo. Ninguna de estas cosas puede servirnos, no en este lugar. Supongo entonces que el resto del mundo sigue existiendo y que son los otros quienes atenderán a consumir los productos anunciados.

Sigo esperando el noticiero. Recuerdo que noticia viene de *notus*, de *nóscere*, *cognoscere*, y de allí también *conocer*: dar a conocer. Es eso todo lo que necesito, conocer la realidad, nuestra realidad. Cuántos quedamos, dónde están todos, por qué nadie viene a ayudarnos.

Ahora comienza un documental sobre las pirámides egipcias. Y de pronto me siento soñar, esto no puede ser real, no puede estar sucediendo.

De atrás del muro al fondo de la calle, sale corriendo una mujer con una niña. Se encuentran conmigo. La mujer me estruja los brazos, dice que se ha enterado de que nuestros enemigos están exterminando a nuestro pueblo. Que llevan meses haciéndolo. Me he quedado confundido. Ella dice que las enfermedades las provocaron ellos, que las lluvias de dos semanas y el terremoto no fueron castigos de Dios, sino condiciones controladas por nuestros enemigos. No la escucho más. Parece que se ha vuelto loca. La niña se sentó a mi lado, se cubrió la cabeza con el trapo negro de su vestido y está viendo el televisor. Había pensado que era la hija, pero no era nadie, sólo una niña y una mujer que se juntaron después del temblor para pasar la noche con menos frío.

Un comercial para recaudar fondos: “Salve a la ballena gris”. Recuerdo también “salven a los delfines; a los tigres de Bengala; a los animales en peligro. Nunca vi alguno que dijera salve a las etnias en extinción.

Caminamos hacia el mercado por los callejones que forma el escombros. Camino evitando brazos y piernas, evitando escuchar los gemidos, evitando olores a cebo, polvo y putrefacción. Cientos de personas que están muriendo muy lento. Tengo ganas de darles con un palo para que empiece el silencio y dejen de chillar como perros. Matarlos o que los maten y dejen de dar lástima con su estrujada humanidad, hombres oscuros, mujeres manchadas, niños que ya desde su nacimiento vienen teñidos de tizne y agua negra.

Un hombre pregonera la última noticia de la radio. Nuestros vecinos vienen en camino, cientos de soldados con costales de granos y tanques de agua están por entrar a la ciudad. Caigo de rodillas y agradezco a mi Señor por enviar a estos hombres a salvar a mi pueblo de piel manchada. Pero se siembra la duda. ¿Será cierto que vienen, alguien los ha visto ya en el camino o nos engañan la radio y el televisor y juegan con nuestra esperanza?

Despierto en el mismo lugar, ya no me queda la esperanza de estar soñando, he despertado en el mismo lugar. Mientras dormía algunos murieron, a cada minuto quedamos menos. La gente pierde el control, algo que desconozco está pasando. Fui directo al televisor: una nación vecina ataca este pueblo, con una estrategia silenciosa comenzaron a exterminarnos, lluvia artificial, aguas cargadas de virus, un terremoto por infrasonido subterráneo. Ahora el ejército ha tomado la ciudad para exterminar al resto de los pobladores. La gente se esconde de los soldados. Lloran los niños y las madres debajo de

las piedras, el miedo al enemigo los obliga a hacerse pequeños, tan pequeños como un alacrán. Hay pánico en la ciudad, los hombres salieron de entre los escombros y quieren huir de inmediato. Quedan pocos con esperanza. Un anciano tropieza conmigo. Qué estás esperando. Debo huir hacia el desierto.

En la salida de la ciudad encuentro grupos de muchos intentando huir. Parece que nadie nos ve ahora. Nos vamos al desierto. Una mujer joven llora nerviosa, dice que irnos así es ir a la muerte. No tenemos agua. Tiene razón, dicen que los soldados ya entraron a la ciudad, pero ésta es nuestra única esperanza.

No sé si llevamos seis horas o dos días caminando, el sol es como un foco gigante que no deja ver. Cuando volteo hacia atrás, distingo algunos cuerpos tirados. Ésos ya no podrán seguir. Pienso que llevamos varios días caminando, quedamos muy pocos, la mujer joven se abrazó de mi cuello, se apoya en mí para continuar.

Son cuatro muros. Estamos encerrados en cuatro muros y un techo inmenso. De pronto el desierto ha desaparecido, hace un momento estábamos viendo el sol y la arena en nuestros pies. Es verdad, el desierto se ha desvanecido. Como si una gran ilusión se diluyera, un espejismo apenas. En cambio estos muros, ese cajón de concreto es real. Somos muchos. A mi izquierda está el anciano de las noticias y enseguida mi madre; a mi derecha el comerciante del centro, los muertos del mercado y la niña; por lo menos somos dos mil. Sorprende que estuviéramos tan juntos todo el tiempo y que no lo notáramos antes. Estamos encerrados dentro de un cubo, cada lado debe medir por lo menos un kilómetro, y el techo es igual a las paredes: una placa extensa gris y fría. Al centro un gran reflector que me destella como el ojo de un cíclope. Pero el ojo del cíclope se licua en sol de mediodía. Otra vez la ilusión del desierto como un holograma en donde quedamos muy pocos. Entonces comprendo lo irónico que es seguir huyendo, lo irónico de tener esperanza, siempre hemos dado vueltas en círculo dentro del cubo. La ciudad, el terremoto, las inundaciones, todo ha sucedido dentro del cubo. Todo aparenta y sólo el cubo es cierto. Pero algunos están confundidos, siguen viendo el desierto y el horizonte, intentan huir todavía, huir. Luego recuerdan que es una apariencia, entonces corren hacia las dunas, se rasgan la ropa y tiran de su pelo. Alguien aparece a mi lado con una radio, en las noticias dicen que mi pueblo ha sido condenado a la tortura máxima en un cubo de realidad artificial. No hay escapatoria pero todos seguimos intentando escapar. En la radio dicen que la gran potencia de occidente vendrá a salvarnos. La gran potencia enviará su ejército de aviones a bombardear a nuestros vecinos y nuestro pueblo será liberado del cubo. La esperanza no se acaba, queda poca, pero no se acaba. Me pregunto si es verdad porque las noticias que escuchamos también son de adentro. Desconfío del radio. Afuera nadie nos oye, estamos incomunicados. La máxima tortura no es el exterminio, la máxima tortura planeada es esta esperanza que no se acaba.

#### **TEXT 14**

**“Incommunicado” by Carmen Rioja, translated by Frances Riddle  
Published in *Palabras Errantes*, January 2014**

“Why, if that’s what the dream is for, to reveal the beast in the end?  
But no, then the dream is to let the leopards continue their endless spiral...”

Julio Cortázar, *A Certain Lucas*, trans. by Gregory Rabassa.

After the earthquake the city looks deserted. It seems as if everyone had died but the people have hidden beneath the rubble in the rooms that remain, under newspapers, boards, sheets of metal. The people hide in holes, in caves made from discarded refrigerators. The hard part is finding food and above all finding water. You could go hungry –some have died– like the ones that are out there in the dirt road, maybe my mother died too, I haven't seen her in several days, I don't know how many.

Yesterday it shook for maybe a minute, now everything looks like this. But before that there were other disasters, a flood first and then the diseases. You would think it was something out of a post-apocalyptic movie. Yet it's not the year 3000, just the present. I don't understand why we are being punished.

Perhaps we come from the family of David. Perhaps we don't come from the family of David. God himself has condemned us or maybe he has forgotten his people. People die slowly, very slowly. The agony is unending. They hurt inside and out with such force that I can almost hear the pain. I would like to help them but I am weak myself and I can hardly stay awake. If I fall asleep I fear I will not wake. In order to survive we must leave in search of another land. A rumor circulates among those of us who remain dispersed: they say we will leave here tomorrow; we will go into the desert to flee from all this death.

What was once the city center is now the only place where a few can still be found: people come out from the rocks in search of water, food, or news. I walk down what appears to be the avenue. A few buildings remain, one houses a shop where televisions are sold. There are some who prefer to exchange shoes and food for a television and if the shop keeper is hungry and has many televisions he will accept the swap. That's why televisions now have a relative value: while they are worth nothing to some, just a little food and water, for others they are more precious than any other object because we're still receiving transmissions and it's the only means we have of knowing what's happening around us, right here. No one understands what is happening and almost no one wants to talk. There are no vehicles for us to leave in and for some reason no one has arrived from outside with news. We are incommunicado.

I stand in front of the window display, the television is on. It's strange that they don't mention us, not even to report on the earthquake. But on the screen they speak only of the reproductive cycle of the night butterfly. And there are no images of the flies, of the worms crawling on people, of the streets piled with two months' worth of garbage. They don't speak of the bodies or the missing. They don't speak of the rats or the hunger that makes us rip them open. I sit in the middle of the street and wait for the program to finish, with the hope that the next program will be the news. I wonder if the world outside has ended, or if we ourselves have ended and we don't know it yet. It seems like the end of mankind has arrived: earthquakes, floods, diseases, natural disasters with few survivors, or none at all. The television drones on, now the commercials: super-active biodegradable detergent for synthetic materials, then a new brand of drug that helps fight obesity, now an additive with a dosage of anti-aging vitamins and an antidepressant. None of these things would help us, not in this place. I suppose then that the rest of the world still exists and that it's the others who will see to the consumption of the advertised products.

I wait for the news. I remember news comes from *notus*, from *noscere*, *congnoscere*, and from there also *to know*: to let know. That is all I need, to know the truth, our truth. How many of us are left, where is everyone, why hasn't anyone come to help us. Now a documentary has started about the Egyptian pyramids. And soon I think I am dreaming, this can't be real, this can't be happening.



From behind a wall at the end of the street a woman and a girl come running. We meet. The woman squeezes my arms; she says she has discovered that our enemies have exterminated our people, that they've been doing it for months. I'm confused. She says that they caused the illnesses, that the two weeks of rain and the earthquake were not punishments from God, but conditions controlled by our enemies. I stop listening to her. It seems she's gone crazy. The girl has sat at my side. She has covered her head with the black cloth of her dress and she is watching the television. I had thought that it was the woman's daughter but she wasn't anyone, just a girl and a woman who joined up together after the quake to keep warmer at night.

A commercial to raise funds: "Save the gray whale". I also remember "Save the dolphins"; the Bengal tiger; the endangered animals. I've never seen one that said save the endangered races.

We walk towards the market down alleys made of rubble. I step, avoiding arms and legs, ignoring the moans, ignoring the smell of bait, dust and decay. Hundreds of people are dying slowly. I wish I could deal them a blow so that silence would come and they would stop howling like dogs. Kill them or let them kill themselves and stop inspiring pity with their crushed humanity: dark men, stained women, children who are colored from birth with soot and black water.

A man announces the latest news from the radio. Our neighbors are on the way, hundreds of soldiers with tons of grain and tanks of water are about to enter the city. I fall to my knees and thank the Lord for sending these men to save my people of soiled skinned. But the seed of doubt is sown. Is it true that they are coming, has anyone seen them on the road or are the radio and television deceiving us, toying with our hope?

I wake up in the same place. I no longer have any hope that I'm dreaming, I have awoken in the same place. While I slept some died, we are fewer with each passing minute. The people lose control, something is happening but I do not know what. I went directly to the television: a neighboring nation attacks our people. Silently they began to exterminate us: artificial rain, water full of viruses, an earthquake caused through underground sonic waves. Now the military has taken the city to exterminate the rest of the inhabitants. People hide from the soldiers. Mothers and children cry beneath the rocks. Fear of the enemy requires us to make ourselves small, as small as a scorpion. There is panic in the city, men come out from the rubble and want to flee immediately. Few remain hopeful. An old man runs into me. What are you waiting for? I must flee to the desert.

On the way out of the city I find large groups of people trying to flee. It seems that no one sees us now. We go to the desert. A young woman cries nervously, she says we are going to our death. We don't have water. She's right. They say that the soldiers have already entered the city, this is our only hope.

I don't know if we have spent six hours or two days walking. The sun is like a huge blinding spotlight. When I turn around, I can make out some fallen bodies. They could not go on any longer. I think that we have been walking for days; very few of us are left. The young woman holds onto my neck, resting her weight on me to keep going.

There are four walls. We are closed inside four walls and an immense roof. Suddenly the desert has disappeared; a moment ago we were looking at the sun and the sand on our feet. It's true, the desert has disappeared. As if some grand illusion has dissolved a faint mirage. In its place these walls, this concrete box is real. There are many of us. To my left is the old man who had the news and right next to him my mother. To my right the shopkeeper from the city center, the dead from the market and the girl. There must

be at least two thousand of us. It's surprising that we were so close together the whole time and we didn't notice each other before. We are enclosed within a cube, each side must measure at least a kilometer and the roof is the same as the walls: an extensive cold, gray sheet. In the center a large light flashes at me like the eye of a Cyclops. But the Cyclops melts in the midday sun. Again the illusion of the desert appears like a hologram in which very few of us remain. Then I understand the irony of trying to flee, the irony of having hope, all this time we have been walking in circles inside this cube. The city, the earthquake, the floods, it has all happened inside the cube. Everything is an illusion and only the cube is real. But some are confused, they keep seeing the desert and the horizon, they still try to escape, to flee. Then they remember that it is an illusion so they run towards the dunes, they rip their clothes and tear at their hair. Someone appears at my side with a radio; on the news they say that my people have been condemned to the maximum torture in the cube of artificial reality. There is no escape but we all keep trying to flee. The radio says that the great Western power will come to save us. The great power will send their army of planes to bomb our neighbors and our people will be freed from the cube. Hope is not lost, there is little left, but it is not lost. I wonder if it's true because the news we hear is also from inside. I distrust the radio. Outside no one hears us, we are incommunicado. The maximum torture is not extermination, the maximum torture is this, the hope that it is not over.

## TEXT 15

**“Victor San La Muerte” by Juan Diego Incardona  
Published in *Palabras Errantes*, October 2012**

Caminaba por el barrio hacia ningún lugar en especial. Era la primavera del año 1993.

En la entrada de Puente 7, lo encontré a Pocho, un empleado de la Municipalidad que había conocido años atrás en San Justo. Me contó que ahora tenía no sé qué cargo en la parte de Barrido y Limpieza. Yo, que andaba desocupado, le manguéé laburo casi por inercia, sin mucha expectativa, pero él, sorprendentemente, me dijo que justo necesitaban a alguien.

Me explicó de qué se trataba y acepté sin dudarlo. A la mañana siguiente, empecé temprano en el mismo lugar en donde nos habíamos cruzado, a la vera de la autopista. A las seis en punto, me reuní con la cuadrilla y debuté limpiando las lomas parquizadas junto a las banquetas, armado con un par de guantes de cuero y una vara de hierro larga y fina como un florete. Me había convertido en pinchapapeles.

Fue un trabajo agradable. Yo lo tomaba como un paseo. Hablaba con uno, hablaba con otro, y mientras tanto levantaba papelitos sin tener ni siquiera que agacharme, gracias al pinchador, que imponía respeto como si fuera un arma. Hasta en la villa me saludaban. Era el rey de la autopista Richieri.

Estaba contento, y además tenía plata en los bolsillos, porque pagaban bastante bien. Pese a todo, duré pocos meses, porque nunca me gustó madrugar. El tiempo que estuve me alcanzó para aprender los gajes del oficio y conocer, probablemente, a los personajes más extraños de los que tenga memoria.

Estaban Martín, Sergio y el Chueco, pinchapapeles de toda la vida; el Tata y el Tito, serrucheros de árboles caídos; los hermanos Fititos —les decían así porque andaban en un

Fitito cada uno—, destapadores de desagües; la pandilla Moreno, barrenderos de escobillón ancho; la pandilla Cortez, barrenderos de escoba; los pibes de Chicago —eran tan fanáticos que se les permitía trabajar con la camiseta verdinegra—, asistentes de bolsas de residuos que iban y venían a toda velocidad, llevándose la basura al camión y reponiendo nuevas a quien las necesitara; la Mirtha —única mujer del grupo—, limpiadora de manchas de aceite, famosa, entre otras cosas, por tener auspiciante: una fábrica de detergente de La Tablada, que le proveía remeras y delantales con el logo de la empresa; y por último, el flaco Víctor, apodado “El mudo”, “La momia” o “San La Muerte”, según la ocasión, un tipo de más o menos cuarenta años de quien no se sabía casi nada, salvo que vivía en Aldo Bonzi. El suyo era el trabajo más triste de los trabajos tristes: recolectaba de la calle animales muertos por atropellamiento o cualquier otra causa.

Quiero creer que, de alguna manera, fuimos amigos. Nuestras charlas eran más un monólogo de mi parte que otra cosa. Yo le hablaba de distintos temas y él se quedaba callado. Ni siquiera podía estar seguro de que me estuviese escuchando. Siempre miraba el piso. Quizás, por costumbre, buscaba restos orgánicos. Su cabeza estaba llena de visiones. Por momentos, lo veía haciendo muecas, y diciendo cosas en voz baja, palabras que no se entendían, secas y cortadas, como la tos.

Los otros muchachos lo trataban muy poco, en parte por la propia actitud de Víctor, que se aislaba, tanto en los viajes como en los almuerzos, pero principalmente porque le tenían miedo. Es que igual que la mayoría de los habitantes del sudoeste, también los trabajadores municipales eran gente supersticiosa.

Cuando llegábamos al punto de reunión y todos nos saludábamos, varios se limpiaban la mano en el pantalón después de estrechársela a él. Lo hacían como quien no quiere la cosa, pero yo me daba cuenta. Una vez lo encaré al mayor de los hermanos Fititos, a Fitito rojo (el otro era azul) y le pregunté por qué hacía eso. Él me contestó que era por el olor. Su excusa tenía algo de verdad. Yo lo había notado desde el principio, pero hacía como que no lo sentía, para no incomodar a Víctor. Evidentemente, los guantes que usaba no eran suficientes y el olor a perro muerto, a gato muerto, se le había pegado a las manos.

—Ni con lavandina se limpia la muerte —dijo Fitito rojo, lapidario.

Pero el colmo de todos era el Chueco, que cuando estaba cerca de Víctor se persignaba a cada rato. Él disimulaba y hacía primero como que se rascaba la frente, después se tocaba en el medio del pecho y finalmente pasaba por un hombro y después por el otro, masajeándose a sí mismo y actuando gestos de dolor, como si estuviera contracturado. Yo lo miraba y me reía por adentro, esperando la cereza del postre, el momento en que se llevaba la mano a la boca y se la besaba a toda velocidad.

Es difícil decir si Víctor se daba cuenta o no de las reacciones que provocaba, de tan ensimismado que estaba todo el día. Si lo sabía, la verdad que lo soportaba con una entereza increíble. Yo no podría haberlo tolerado. Él, en cambio, convivía con la superstición de los demás, que lo consideraban no sólo un malasuerte, sino también alguien malvado, y seguía con su rutina como si no pasara nada, elevado por encima de las opiniones y creencias, más preocupado por el perfeccionamiento de su oficio que por las habladurías del mundo.

Tenía una gran disciplina, y mucha paciencia. Cuando alguien de la cuadrilla daba el alerta de ¡Animal muerto!, enseguida aparecía Víctor en el lugar de los hechos y sacaba de su mochila las espátulas y extrañas herramientas que él mismo fabricaba. Como si fuera un arqueólogo, despegaba lentamente el cadáver que ya empezaba a fosilizarse en el asfalto,

por acción del sol y de las ruedas impiadosas de los autos que siguieron aplastándolo una y otra vez.

Al finalizar la operación, guardaba los restos en una bolsa negra. Lo hacía con mucho cuidado y solemnidad. Hay que reconocer que semejante respeto era digno de admiración, aunque bastante inútil por cierto, porque en pocas horas el desafortunado iría a parar, como toda bolsa de residuo, al basural de turno.

Una vez que la bolsa era atada y anudada, alguno de los pibes de Chicago se convertía en cadete de la Parca y, en menos de un suspiro, llevaba el bulto hasta la caja del camión.

El flaco Víctor se quedaba un rato mirando la mancha final, que él no permitía que limpiasen, ni siquiera la Mirtha, que a veces se ofrecía a ayudarlo, detergente en mano. Era como una cosa mística que le agarraba. No podría decir cuál era el verdadero motivo, pero así pasaba siempre. Ya fuera a la mañana o a la tarde, San La Muerte, erguido como un soldado, se tomaba el tiempo que fuera necesario hasta asegurarse que las últimas gotas de vida del pobre diablo se evaporaran allí mismo.

Verlo era un espectáculo. Por eso, los compañeros que andábamos cerca, dejábamos un rato lo que estábamos haciendo y nos quedábamos mirándolo, hipnotizados casi como él, que finalmente cerraba la escena balbuceando algo, quién sabe qué.

La mayoría de las víctimas eran perros y gatos callejeros, pero a veces se trataba de otros animales. Víctor no hacía diferencias y a todos les prestaba su servicio: desde palomas y sapos hasta ratas.

Muy de vez en cuando, levantaba liebres o culebras del campito que se aventuraban a cruzar la avenida Olavarría. El hecho más raro fue el de un Tatú Carreta, un tipo de armadillo que, según contaron el Tata y el Tito, suele verse por el norte. Ellos lo sabían bien porque eran chaqueños; lo que no sabían, y tampoco los demás, es cómo había llegado ese bicho hasta Celina. Era un misterio. El Tata propuso que lo comiéramos asado, porque decía que su carne era riquísima, propiamente un bocado de los reyes, pero por más que insistió durante media hora, apoyado por todos, el flaco Víctor no quiso saber nada y encaprichado le dio el mismo destino que a los demás.

—No hay manera con este cabeza dura —se lamentó el Tata—, ni que encuentre un dinosaurio va a dejar que lo toquen.

La única excepción eran los animales domésticos. Si alguien reclamaba el cuerpo, Víctor, automáticamente, se lo entregaba al dueño, y seguía con otra tarea.

Cuando esto pasaba, todos salían disparados y lo dejaban solo al pobre Víctor, para enfrentar la situación. Es que nadie quería estar presente en un momento así, porque te partía el alma ver a un chico que perdió la mascota, a una señora que se quedó sin compañía, a cualquier persona, en definitiva, llorando sobre los restos del ser querido.

Uno de los casos más famosos, y también más extraños, fue el de Lola, la vieja tortuga de Doña Lupe. Los vecinos estaban conmocionados. Me acuerdo como si fuera hoy.

Resulta que Aldo, el hijo de Lupe, “vago de porquería”, según lo nombraba la gente esa tarde para desquitarse, había dejado la puerta mal cerrada. Vaya uno a saber qué le pasó por la cabeza al bicho para dejar el jardín, pero movido por Dios o por el Diablo, salió a la vereda y allí empezó una lenta carrera, una carrera fatal. Lo que más sorprendió de este accidente, fue el lugar adonde sucedió: a más de dos cuerdas de la casa de Lupe.

Era increíble que nadie la haya visto caminar tanta distancia e impedido su loca aventura, pero así fue nomás, porque a esa hora de la siesta hasta los perros duermen y ni el

loro anda por la calle. Paso tras paso, avanzó, subiendo y bajando escaloncitos por Giribone, cruzando la zanja y la misma calle Ugarte para seguir, contra viento y marea, hasta San Pedrito.

La naturaleza es sabia, se dijo en el tumulto, porque del otro lado de San Pedrito empezaban los potreros. En esa dirección caminaba Lola, que anhelaba, tal vez, perderse dentro de tanto yuyo, un deseo digno, hay que decirlo, de sus parientes las tortugas marinas, que, al nacer, sólo buscan el mar.

Rodeado por vecinos y empleados, Víctor cumplió, una vez más, su trabajo. Cuidadosamente, despegó a Lola del asfalto, y después de envolverla en un nylon, se la entregó a Lupe, que volvió a su casa escoltada por un montón de vecinos. Todos trataban de consolarla, pero era en vano.

Mientras Víctor cumplía el último rito, hablando solo frente a la mancha de sangre, los curiosos que todavía quedaban, seguían reconstruyendo la historia. Algunas mujeres, lideradas por la Porota, de pronto culpaban a Teresa, otra vecina que para mí no tenía nada que ver, pero que ellas señalaban por ser enemiga histórica de Doña Lupe. Comentaban que seguro la vio salir a Lola y que a propósito no le avisó a nadie. La versión más fantasiosa decía que Teresa había sembrado el camino con zanahoria rallada, para tenderle una trampa a la tortuga. Esto me sonaba a delirio mayor, pero muchos realmente lo creían y empezaban a repetirlo, porque el odio en un barrio, como en un pueblo, puede ser infinito.

En las dos semanas siguientes, Víctor casi no tuvo trabajo, porque llamativamente no se produjo ninguna fatalidad. La gente cuidaba a sus mascotas como nunca y hasta sacaban a los perros con correa, una conducta insólita en el barrio, donde todo el mundo simplemente dejaba que los animales pasearan sueltos, por su cuenta. La paranoia llegó a tal punto que ahora Porota decía que una secta había venido a Villa Celina para sacrificar animales, en honor de no sé qué dios de los negros de Brasil.

Hasta la propia naturaleza parecía advertida, porque, tal como lo demostraba el ocio obligado del flaco Víctor, ni las palomas se equivocaban cuando picaban migas de la calle, ni las ratas se arriesgaban a salir de los agujeros de los cordones, ni los sapos abandonaban los charcos.

Fue la época dorada de los animales de mi barrio. Eran tan mimados que en la Veterinaria “San Roque” se agotaron las golosinas, juguetes y huesitos. Hasta comida balanceada compraban los vecinos, que ya no consideraban suficientes los restos de guiso, de sopa, de arroz, que antes les daban a sus mascotas.

Esta racha puso a Víctor bajo una nueva luz. Mientras los demás seguíamos con nuestras tareas habituales, barriendo, pinchando y destapando, él ahora iba despacio por la vereda sin preocuparse por nada, con la cabeza en alto, tomando el sol de su veranito de San Juan.

Se lo veía tan relajado, que cuando viajábamos en el camión, por momentos cerraba los ojos y hasta parecía dormirse, algo que le sucedía a la mayoría pero jamás a él, siempre obsesivo y enfocado en su trabajo. Pero ahora debería estar reconciliándose con el sueño. Quién sabe si habrá podido pegar un ojo en esos últimos años, de tantas pesadillas que lo deben haber torturado en forma de perros, gatos y pajaritos recién muertos.

Durante exactamente dieciséis días, la fauna del sudoeste se mantuvo saludable, y no hubo nada que interrumpiera su vitalidad, ni camiones, ni zanjas contaminadas, ni honderas o rifles de aire comprimido, pero la mañana del día diecisiete, una mañana de cielo encapotado que no se decidía si llover o no llover, una voz gritó algo que nadie



hubiera querido escuchar. Era la voz de Fitito rojo, que, con un tono cargado de dramatismo, anunció:

—¡Perro atropellado en Giribone y Unanué!

Nos quedamos duros como una piedra, inclusive Víctor, que en ese instante caminaba justo al lado mío. Alrededor, el ritmo de la calle también se detuvo, como si no corriera más el tiempo. A lo lejos, la boca abierta de Fitito intentaba repetir el alerta, pero, al menos yo, no podía escucharlo.

De pronto, el mundo empezó a girar de nuevo. Víctor se enderezó hasta ponerse firme, dio una media vuelta y se dirigió, acelerando, hacia la esquina en cuestión.

Toda la cuadrilla municipal lo persiguió. En la cuadra, algunas ventanas se abrieron violentamente, y los vecinos que habían escuchado, se asomaron para ver.

Enseguida, varios salieron a la calle a correr la bola. La Porota, enloquecida, le avisaba a todo el que se cruzaba en su camino, y cada vez que lo hacía, agregaba un nuevo detalle.

—¡Mataron a un perro!

—¡Volvieron a matar a un perro!

—¡Los de la secta volvieron a matar a un perro!

Al llegar a la esquina de Giribone y Unanué, ya se había formado una ronda alrededor del cuerpo. Nadie se atrevía a tocarlo. Apenas apareció Víctor, la gente abrió paso. Cuando vi al animal, se me paró el corazón. La víctima era nada más y nada menos que “El viejo”, un perro blanco callejero que paraba con mis amigos en la esquina de casa. Desde hacía dos años, mi hermana María Laura le tiraba una mantita en el porche y le daba de comer.

Supuestamente, por lo que nos contó Tuta, iba ciego atrás de una perra y por eso se distrajo. Un auto le pegó con todo y el perro rebotó como tres metros y ahí se quedó, duro.

Víctor sacó sus herramientas de la mochila y desplegó la bolsa negra.

Todos guardaban silencio, hasta que la Porota estalló de bronca:

—¡Me indigna! ¡Me indigna!

Entonces, las voces se multiplicaron y el barullo creció tanto que te dejaba sordo. Pero entre todas las cosas que se decían, una frase, tibiamente, ganó la escena. Era como un grito que silenciaba todo lo demás, un grito pegado en voz baja. La boca de San La Muerte pronunció lo inesperado:

—Está vivo.

—¿Qué decís? —le preguntamos todos.

Víctor no contestó. Levantó al perro con cuidado, y usando la bolsa negra como si fuera una camilla, lo llevó hasta el camión.

—¡Está vivo! ¡El viejo está vivo! —repetía la gente.

Sin perder tiempo, el camión arrancó y salió por Giribone hacia la colectora de la Richieri. En caravana, fuimos hasta el M.A.P.A. de Boedo, allá en Capital.

En la guardia, el veterinario nos dijo que el perro estaba en shock y que tenía fracturadas dos patas, pero que se iba a recuperar. El grupo de Celina estalló de júbilo. El propio Víctor sonrió, una sonrisa ancha como la risa, que jamás le había visto antes.

Pronto, para su pesar, la vida y la muerte volverían a la normalidad. Sus manos se calzarían nuevamente los guantes, empuñarían las extrañas herramientas y atarían cientos de veces las bolsas negras, pero no ese día. Pronto, su boca recitaría oscuras oraciones frente a las manchas de sangre, el resto de la cuadrilla municipal observaría a distancia sus rituales, los pibes de Chicago llevarían los bultos a la caja del camión, pero no ese día.

## TEXT 16

**“Victor Saint Death” by Juan Diego Incardona, translated by Elsa Treviño  
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I walked around the neighbourhood in no particular direction. It was the spring of 1993.

At the entrance of bridge number 7, I encountered Pocho, a Council employee who I had met years before in San Justo. He told me that he now held I don't know what position in the area of Sweeping and Cleaning. Being on the dole, I scrounged a job from him almost by inertia, without much expectation, but surprisingly he told me that just then they were looking for someone.

He explained what the deal was and I accepted without hesitating. The next morning, I started early in the same place where we had bumped into each other, at the verge of the motorway. At six o'clock sharp, I met up with the troop and made my debut cleaning the landscaped hills next to the hard shoulders, armed with a pair of leather gloves and a steel rod, fine and long like a fencing foil. I had become a litter picker.

It was a nice job. I saw it as an excursion. I talked to one, I talked to another, and in the meantime I picked up little bits of papers without even having to bend down, thanks to the litter picker, which commanded respect as if it was a weapon. Even in the shantytowns they greeted me. I was the king of the Richieri motorway.

I was happy and what is more, I had dough in my pockets, because the pay was fairly good. Despite everything, I only lasted a few months because I've never liked getting up early. The time I was there was enough for me to learn the occupational hazards and to meet, probably, the weirdest characters I can recall.

There was Martin, Sergio and the Crooked, life-long litter pickers; Tata and Tito, sawyers of fallen trees; the Fitito brothers –they called them so because each of them drove a little Fiat 600–, sewage uncloggers; the Moreno gang, wide-broom sweepers; the Cortez gang, regular-broom sweepers; the Chicago boys –they were such fans that they were allowed to work wearing the team 's green-and-black jersey–, bin bag assistants that came and went at full speed, taking the rubbish to the bin lorry and providing new bags to anyone who needed them; Mirtha –the only woman in the group–, oil-stain cleaner, famous among other things for having a sponsor: a detergent factory from La Tablada, that provided her with shirts and aprons with the company's logo; and finally, skinny Victor, dubbed “the Mute”, “the Mummy” or “Saint Death” depending on the occasion, a bloke around forty of whom barely anything was known, except that he lived in Aldo Bonzi. His was the saddest of sad jobs: he collected any animal off the streets that had been run over or died in any other way.

I want to believe that, in some way, we were friends. Our conversations were more a monologue on my part than anything else. I talked to him about different topics and he remained silent. I couldn't even be sure he was listening. He always looked at the floor. Maybe, by habit, he looked for organic remains. His head was full of visions. At times, I saw him grimacing and murmuring things, words that couldn't be made out, dry and broken, like a cough.

The other guys didn't have much to do with him, partly due to Victor's own attitude, isolating himself on the trips as well as at lunch, but mainly because they were afraid of him. The thing is that like most Southwesteners, council workers were superstitious people too.



When we arrived to the meeting point and everyone greeted each other, some would wipe their hand with their trousers right after shaking his. They did it on the sly, but I would notice. I confronted the oldest Fitito brother, red Fitito (the other one was blue), and I asked him why he did that. He answered that it was because of the smell. His excuse had some truth to it. I had noticed from the beginning but I pretended I didn't so as not to bother Victor. Evidently, the gloves he used weren't enough and the smell of a dead dog, of a dead cat, had stuck to his hands.

“Not even with bleach can death be cleaned”, said red Fitito, categorically.

But the worst of all was the Crooked, who, whenever he was near Victor, crossed himself all the time. He tried to hide it and pretend that he was scratching his forehead, and then he would touch the middle of his chest and finally, go from one shoulder to the other, massaging himself and acting out gestures of pain, as if he had a muscle spasm. I looked at him and laughed inside, waiting for the cherry on top of the cake, the moment when he would take his hand to his mouth and kiss it speedily.

It's difficult to say whether Victor was aware or not of the reactions he provoked, given how absent-minded he was all day long. If he knew, the truth is that he endured it with incredible composure. I wouldn't have been able to tolerate it. Instead, he lived with the superstition of the others, who considered him not only a bad-omen but also someone evil; he continued with his routine as if nothing happened, rising above opinions and beliefs, more worried about perfecting his trade than the world's chatter.

He was greatly disciplined and had lots of patience. When someone in the troop gave the “Dead animal!” alert, Victor appeared at the scene right away and took the spatulas and strange tools that he manufactured himself out of his backpack. As if he was an archaeologist, he peeled off the cadaver that already had started to fossilize on the asphalt, by action of the sun and the unmerciful wheels of the cars that kept smashing it over and over again.

At the end of the procedure, he put the remains in a black bag. He did it with utmost care and solemnity. It must be recognised that such respect was admirable, although certainly quite useless, because in a few hours the unfortunate would end up, as any bag of residues, in the corresponding landfill.

Once the bag was tied and knotted, one of the Chicago boys would become Death's cadet and, in the blink of an eye, he would take the bundle to the truck's box. Skinny Victor stayed for a while staring at the final stain, that he didn't allow anyone to clean, not even Mirtha, who sometimes offered to help him, detergent at hand. It was as if something mystical took him over. I wouldn't be able to say what was the true motive, but that's how it always happened. Be it the morning or the evening, Saint Death, upright as a soldier, took all the time necessary until he made sure that the last drops of life of the poor fellow evaporated right there.

Watching him was a spectacle. That's why the colleagues who were around, left what they were doing for a while and stayed looking at him, almost as hypnotised as he was; he would finally closed the scene mumbling something, who knows what. The majority of the victims were stray dogs and cats, but sometimes there were other animals. Victor didn't discriminate and provided his service to all: from pigeons and toads to rats.

Occasionally, he picked up hares or country snakes that adventured in crossing Olavarría Avenue. The weirdest event was that of a Tatú Carreta, a type of armadillo that, according to Tata and Tito, is often seen in the north. They knew this well because they

were from the Chaco province; what they didn't know, and neither did anyone else, was how had that creature arrived to Celina. It was a mystery. Tata proposed we ate it roasted, because he said its meat was delicious, a proper delicacy fit for a king, but despite him insisting for half an hour, supported by everyone, skinny Victor didn't want to hear anything about it and, whimsically, gave it the same fate as the others.

"There is nothing we can do with this stubborn guy", lamented Tata, "not even if he found a dinosaur would he let them touch it".

The only exceptions were domestic animals. If someone claimed the body, he handed it to the owner, and he continued with another task.

When this happened, everyone else would shoot off and leave poor Victor alone to face the situation. The thing is that no one wanted to be present in a moment like that, because it crushed your soul to see a kid that had lost his pet, a lady that had lost her companion, anyone, definitely, crying over the remains of a loved one.

One of the most famous cases, and also one of the weirdest, was that of Lola, Mrs. Lupe's old tortoise. The neighbours were shocked. I remember it as if it were today.

It turns out that Aldo, Lupe's son, – "useless scumbag bum" was how people referred to him that afternoon to vent their anger – hadn't shut the door properly. Who knows what went through the creature's head to leave the garden, but moved by God or by the Devil, it went out onto the pavement and there it started a slow race, a fatal race. What was most surprising about this accident was where it happened: more than two blocks away from Lupe's house.

It was incredible that no one had seen it walk such a long distance nor had prevented the animal's crazy adventure, but that's just how it was, because at that time during the siesta even the dogs are asleep and not even the parrot is out on the street. Step by step, it moved forward, going up and down the steps through Giribone, crossing the ditch and the same Ugarte Street to continue, against wind and tide, until San Pedrito.

Nature is wise, the crowd said to themselves, because on the other side of San Pedrito the paddocks began. In that direction walked Lola, who yearned, maybe, to get lost among all those weeds, a worthy desire, it must be said, of her relatives the marine turtles, which seek the ocean as soon as they're born.

Surrounded by neighbours and employees, Victor carried out his job once more. Carefully, he peeled Lola off the tarmac and, after wrapping her in a nylon bag, he handed her to Lupe, who returned to her house escorted by a crowd of neighbours. Everyone was trying to console her but it was all in vain.

While Victor took care of the last rites, talking to himself in front of the stain of blood, the remaining onlookers kept recreating the story. Some women, led by Porota, suddenly blamed Teresa, another neighbour who, for me, had nothing to do with it, but who they singled out for being Doña Lupe's historical enemy. They observed that she surely must have seen her, Lola, go out and that she didn't tell anyone on purpose. The most imaginative version said that Teresa had planted the way with grated carrot, to set the tortoise up. This sounded to me like a major delirium, but many really believed it and they had started to repeat it, because hatred in a neighbourhood, like in a small town, can be infinite.

During the following two weeks, Victor had almost no work, because strikingly, no fatality took place. People took care of their pets as never before and they even took the dogs out on leads, quite unusual behaviour in the neighbourhood, where one and all let their animals parade unleashed, on their own. Paranoia reached such a peak that Porota now said

that a sect had come to Villa Celina to sacrifice animals, to honour who knows which god of the Afro Brazilians.

Even nature seemed to have been warned because, as skinny Victor's forced leisure time showed, not even the pigeons blundered when they pecked for crumbs in the street, nor the rats risked leaving the curb holes, nor the toads abandoned the puddles.

It was a golden age for the animals in my neighbourhood. They were so spoilt that in "San Roque" pet shop they ran out of treats, toys and little bones. The neighbours even bought balanced food, since they didn't consider the stew and soup and rice leftovers that they fed their pets before enough.

This streak put Victor under a new light. While the others kept to their regular tasks, sweeping, picking and unclogging, he now went slowly by the pathway without worrying about anything, his head up high, enjoying the sun in his little summer of San Juan.

He looked so relaxed that when we travelled on the truck, he would close his eyes for moments and he even seemed to fall asleep, something that happened to most of us but never to him, always obsessive and focused on his work. But now he must've been making up on missed sleep. Who knows if he had slept a wink in those last years, from all the nightmares that must've tortured him in the shape of freshly deceased dogs, cats and little birds.

For sixteen days exactly, the fauna of the southwest remained healthy and there was nothing to interrupt its vitality, neither trucks, nor polluted ditches, nor slingshots or compressed air rifles. But on the morning of the seventeenth day, an overcast morning that couldn't decide whether to rain or not, a voice yelled something that no one would've wanted to hear. It was red Fitito's voice that in a drama-loaded tone announced:

"Dog hit in Giribone and Unanué!"

We were all struck dumbfounded, stiff as stones, even Victor, who in that instant walked just beside me. Around us, the rhythm of the street stopped as well, as if time had stopped still. In the distance, Fitito's open mouth tried to repeat the notice but, at least I, couldn't hear him.

Suddenly, the world began to turn again. Victor straightened up until he was firm, turned around and marched, gathering speed, to the mentioned corner.

The entire Council troop chased him. Down the block, some windows opened violently, and the neighbours that had heard peeked out to watch.

Right away, several folks came out on the street to spread the word. Porota, out of her mind, let everyone in her way know, and each time she did, she added a new detail.

"They killed a dog!"

"They killed a dog again!"

"The people from the sect killed a dog again!"

Reaching the corner of Giribone and Unanué, a round huddle had already formed around the body. No one dared touch it. The moment Victor appeared, people made way. When I saw the animal, my heart stopped. The victim was no other than "the Old Fellow", a white dog mongrel that always stopped by my friend's house on the corner. For two years, my sister María Laura had thrown him a blanket in the porch and had fed him.

Supposedly, according to what Tuta told us, he was blindly following a female dog and that's why he got distracted. A car hit him with all its force and the dog bounced about three meters and there it stayed, stiff.

Victor took out his tools from the backpack and spread out the black bag. Everyone remained silent until Porota burst with anger:

“It makes me so angry! It makes me so angry!”

Then, the voices multiplied and the uproar grew so much that it was deafening. But among all the things they said, a phrase, tepidly, won the scene. It was like a scream that silenced everything else, a scream uttered in a low voice. Saint Death’s mouth pronounced the unexpected.

“It’s alive”.

“What are you saying?” Everybody asked.

Victor didn’t reply. He lifted the dog carefully and, using the black bag as a stretcher, he took it to the truck.

“It’s alive! The Old Fellow is alive!” People repeated.

Without wasting time, the truck pulled away and went out onto Giribone Street towards the collector lane of Richieri Avenue. In a caravan, we went to the office of the Society for Animal Protection of Boedo, there in the Capital.

At the ward, the veterinary told us that the dog was in shock and that it had two broken legs, but that it would recover. Celina’s group burst with joy. Victor himself smiled a smile broad as laughter, which I had never seen in him before.

Soon, to his regret, life and death would go back to normal. His hands would put on the gloves anew, they would wield the strange tools and would tie hundreds of times the black bags, but not that day. Soon, his mouth would recite dark prayers in front of the stains of blood, the rest of the Council’s troop would observe his rituals in the distance, the Chicago boys would carry the bundles to the box of the truck, but not that day.

## **TEXT 17**

**“Señales” by Krina Ber**

**Published in *Palabras Errantes*, December 2012**

Mi amigo Juan Emilio compró con mucho esfuerzo y escandalosos intereses hipotecarios, el apartamento 22B en el piso 22 del conjunto residencial más alto de la ciudad. En su decisión pesó no poco el hecho que las ventanas se orientan hacia el sur, donde en el mar de viviendas marginales que tapizan las colinas se alzan algunos edificios de diez y hasta quince pisos, con fachadas ennegrecidas y desconchadas por los años. Su madre vivía en el más cercano de ellos, en el último nivel debajo de la azotea donde en algunas tardes, cuando la lluvia limpiaba el hollín del aire Juan Emilio habría podido verla lavando la ropa en su balconcito si tuviera un telescopio o un par de gemelos de primera. Lástima que no poseía tales cosas, pues tampoco podía llamarla por teléfono: desde que se mudó aún espera que le instalen una línea y su celular está sin saldo, pero qué importa eso si ella por su parte desconfía de tan sofisticados artefactos; total, tiempo hace que no encuentran tanto que decirse como para justificar el gasto. No obstante, para que él no se preocupara, cada noche a las ocho en punto la madre de Juan Emilio tenía la costumbre de apagar y prender la luz en su cocina, tres veces seguidas, para confirmarle al hijo que se encontraba bien. En lo regular, era suficiente. Por eso él había comprado ese apartamento aunque los que miran hacia la montaña del norte fuesen mucho más apreciados.

Con el tiempo y la escasez de la gasolina las colas en las calles alrededor del conjunto residencial se hicieron tan densas que los conductores se vieron forzados prescindir de sus vehículos abandonándolos a su suerte. Las carcasas inútiles de carros y camionetas han sido inmediatamente ocupadas por buhoneros deseosos de proteger sus

mercancías de la lluvia y el sol. Algunos persistieron en su comercio informal, otros aprovecharon el espacio techado, vidrios, chapas, asientos y otros materiales disponibles para instalarse con sus familias de un modo permanente. Incluso gozaron por un tiempo de emisoras radiales hasta que se descargaran las baterías: último toque de lujo en la ciudad donde por esas fechas comenzó a escasear la corriente eléctrica. Hace tiempo ya que los vecinos del conjunto estaban acostumbrados al racionamiento del agua a razón de veinte minutos dos veces al día, pero el de la electricidad los agarró desprevenidos, especialmente a los que no se habían provisto a tiempo de queroseno, fibra óptica, papel higiénico, artefactos inalámbricos y equipos de supervivencia. En las torres el uso de los ascensores ha sido restringido y regulado rigurosamente por medio de “tickets” que los Funcionarios del Condominio entregaban semanalmente a los habitantes. Como Juan Emilio estaba desempleado no necesitaba realmente salir y traspasó los suyos a la mujer que aún tenía trabajo y, de paso, traía las compras. Se dedicaba a hacer las colas necesarias y pasaba el resto del día acodado en su balcón, escrutando el horizonte de bloques de arcilla y ropa tendida, preocupado por su madre que había dejado de comunicarse, aunque se notaba que la escasez de la corriente estaba afectando también a las colinas del sur y cabía suponer que fuese ésta la causa de la interrupción en su rutina diaria de señales.

Efectivamente, así fue. Agazapada en su cocina oscura la vieja se mortificaba por su lado, intuyendo la preocupación del hijo. Se retorció los dedos, ayunaba y rezaba. La quinta noche del racionamiento eléctrico, a través de las brumas de todos los años de la vida se le apareció su propio abuelo, hombre de la selva y del monte, y le mostró el camino que debía seguir. La mujer preparó una palangana llena de ascuas y salió afuera; por suerte su minúsculo balcón era el más alto de todos, no techado por ninguno. Allí, pese a su edad y artritis, se agachó y con unos gestos expertos que venían desde más lejos que lo que su memoria alcanzara, comenzó a agitar una gruesa cobija encima de la palangana.

Del otro lado de la distancia aérea que separaba sus viviendas Juan Emilio contemplaba las pequeñas nubes compactas que se desprendían a intervalos regulares del balconcito de su madre y se elevaban verticalmente en el cielo de la metrópolis hasta diluirse en el tono gris de la contaminación general. Sonrió con alivio no exento de cierto orgullo filial y palmeó la espalda de su mujer.

—Mira eso, Amelia. Mi vieja nos está enviando señales de humo.

La madre de Juan Emilio, preocupada tan sólo con avisar al hijo ignoraba la naturaleza del mensaje que estaba enviando. Pero algunos de los moradores en las carrocías desmontadas reconocieron en el latido de sus venas el antiguo llamado a la guerra. Se despojaron de sus bluyines, recogieron palos, pistolas y varas metálicas, arrancaron las plumas a sus gallinas para adornarse con ellas, recogieron palos y varas metálicas y con el hollín de los cauchos se pintaron las caras.

Y la ciudad se llenó de señales de humo y de sonido de tambores.

## TEXT 18

“Signals” by Krina Ber, translated by Adam Fry  
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With much effort, not to speak of the prohibitive mortgage rates, my friend Juan Emilio bought himself flat 22B, on the 22nd floor of the tallest apartment block in the city. He made his decision based on the fact that the windows faced south, where, from the sea



of ramshackle homes that covered the hills, some buildings rose ten, even fifteen floors high, their facades blackened and paint peeling with the passage of time. His mother lived in the nearest building to him, on the top floor beneath the roof. Some afternoons when the rain came and swept the soot from the air, Juan Emilio would have been able to see her washing clothes had he a telescope or a pair of decent binoculars. Such a shame then, that he had neither. He couldn't call her either: since he moved he was still waiting for the phone company to come and install the line, and he had run out of credit on his mobile phone. Not that this mattered, given that his mother mistrusted such new-fangled things and, since they didn't have much to speak about, there was no reason for the extra cost. So that he wouldn't worry, however, Juan Emilio's mother had the habit of flicking the light on and off three times in a row at eight on the dot every evening, just to let her son know that she was fine. Usually, this sufficed. That's why he had bought this flat, even though those that faced north, with a view of the mountains, were much more sought after.

With the passing of time, and the scarcity of petrol, the queues that formed in the streets surrounding the block became so dense that drivers were forced to abandon their vehicles, surrendering them to their fate. Street peddlers, eager to protect their wares come rain or shine, quickly made themselves at home in the abandoned vehicles that littered the streets. Whilst some persisted with their informal trade, others moved themselves and their families in permanently, taking advantage of the materials at their disposal; a roof above their heads, glass in the windows, and spare seats. For a time they even enjoyed the luxury of radio, until the car batteries died: the last glimpse of luxury in a city where at that time, electricity was becoming scarcer and scarcer. The residents of the block had been used to rationing water for some twenty minutes a day for a while, but the increasing power cuts caught them by surprise, especially those who hadn't stocked up with the necessary supplies: kerosene, optical cables, toilet paper and survival kits. Use of the lifts in the tower blocks had been restricted and regulated by 'tickets' that were handed out each week by the Residents' Committee. Seeing as Juan Emilio was unemployed, he didn't really need to leave so he gave his tickets to his wife. She was still working, and occasionally brought home the shopping. He queued in the obligatory queues, and spent the rest of the day ensconced on his balcony, surveying the horizon of drying clothes and clay bricks, worried about his mother who had ceased communication. He knew that the power cuts had also affected those living in the hills to the south, and came to the conclusion that this was why her daily signals had stopped.

That was, indeed, why. Trapped in her darkened kitchen, the old woman would sit, wringing her hands and sensing her son's concern. She prayed and fasted, and on the fifth night of power rationing, her own grandfather appeared to her out of a timeless mist, a man of jungle and of mountain, showing her the path that she should follow. Carrying a smouldering bowl of embers she had lit, she made her way outside. Luckily, her tiny balcony was the highest, and so she had no one above her. There, despite her age and arthritis, she knelt down and expertly started to waft a thick blanket over the embers, an ancient movement from somewhere far back in time, a place even her memory would not reach.

Across the space which separated their buildings, Juan Emilio watched the small puffs of smoke floating up from his mother's balcony. They rose up vertically until they were lost among the grey of the polluted city sky. He smiled gratefully and (not without a certain filial pride) tapped his wife on the back.

'Look at that Amelia, mother is sending us smoke signals.'

Juan Emilio's mother, being so preoccupied with letting her son know she was safe, had failed to recognise the very nature of the message she was sending. But those who lived in the stripped out shells of abandoned cars recognised the ancient call to war in the beating of the blood in their veins. They stripped off their jeans and collected up sticks, guns and metal rods. They plucked the feathers from their hens to adorn themselves, painted their faces with soot and took up arms.

And so the city was filled with smoke signals and the sound of drums.