QUE CUENTEN LAS MUJERES / LET THE WOMEN SPEAK:

TRANSLATING CONTEMPORARY FEMALE ECUADORIAN AUTHORS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Honors Tutorial College

Ohio University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation

from the Honors Tutorial College

with the degree of

Bachelor of Arts in English

by

Julianna M Coleman

April 2016
This thesis has been approved by

The Honors Tutorial College and the Department of English

Dr. Katarzyna Marciniak
Professor, English
Thesis Advisor

Dr. Joseph McLaughlin
Director of Studies, English
Honors Tutorial College

Dr. Jeremy Webster
Dean, Honors Tutorial College
Table of Contents

I. The Politics and Ethics of Translation .......................................................... 1

II. Translating Contemporary Female Ecuadorian Authors ....................... 24

III. Que cuenten las mujeres/Let the Women Speak ................................... 39

   Solange Rodríguez Pappe ........................................................................ 40

   Domestic Disaster ................................................................................... 41

   Gabriela Alemán ..................................................................................... 55

   Red Lips ................................................................................................... 56

   Sonia Manzano ....................................................................................... 65

   Leda ........................................................................................................ 66

   Aminta Buenaño ..................................................................................... 78

   The Woman Who Mislaid Her Body .................................................... 79

   Luz Argentina Chiriboga ...................................................................... 91

   The Mansion ........................................................................................... 92

IV. Works Cited ............................................................................................ 101

V. Works Consulted .................................................................................... 102

VI. Appendix of Original Works ................................................................. 103

   Calamidad doméstica, Solange Rodríguez Pappe

   Labios rojos, Gabriela Alemán

   Leda, Sonia Manzano

   La mujer que extravió su cuerpo, Aminta Buenaño

   El castillo, Luz Argentina Chiriboga
The Politics and Ethics of Translation

The problem with studying literature in two languages is that eventually, one realizes that there are some things that are simply better said in one than in the other. After years of studying language, I find that when I write quickly, my writing becomes a jumble of Spanish and my native English, jumping from one language to the other depending on which words are shortest to write, or which phrase is more evocative, or which word communicates exactly the idea I was looking for. Both languages have lexical and semantic gaps that can only be filled by code-switching; there are some things I can say in Spanish that I simply cannot say properly in English, and vice versa. And yet, I have known for years that what I truly wish to write are translations, works that force me to do precisely what I often feel I cannot: say as clearly as possible in one language what was originally expressed in another. Despite the inherent difficulties of working across languages, I have found both fulfillment and enjoyment in manipulating others’ works into something different but still equally recognizable, using my own voice to make others’ texts speak. This project is the culmination of four years of studying, among other things, the Spanish language, translation theory, Ecuadorian culture and literary history, and transnational feminist theory, in order to accurately and respectfully represent the texts I translate. In the end, I chose to translate five short stories by contemporary female Ecuadorian authors, stories that, according to their original authors, have never before been translated into English. These texts, with their unabashed discussions of sexuality, desire, racial prejudice, infidelity, old age, and captivity, have a certain kind of intellectual,
affective, and personal power that I found intriguing and worthy of sharing with the
English-speaking world through the medium of translation.

What, exactly, is translation? The easy answer is that it is the act of taking a
text written in one language and making it speak in another language. The difficult
answer is that translation is an imperfect, irreverent, impossible task that involves
removing a text from its original context, rearranging and rewriting everything about it
that makes it important, and then attempting to insert it into a different context, all
without losing too much meaning along the way. There is no substitute for reading the
original text, many would say, but there is often no way for the non-bilingual reader to
engage with the original text; translation, then, becomes the avenue by which readers
who would never be able to approach the original text can still engage with the ideas it
presents. Translations of texts into more widely-spoken tongues like English have the
potential to bring important texts to worldwide audiences, mass dissemination granted
at the cost of important cultural references, context, and purity of meaning. But this is
a trade-off that many authors and translators are willing to make, given that some of
the people who would gain the most interest or benefit from a translated text do not
have the privilege of studying the language of the original text.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, well-known feminist theoretician, in her essay
“The Politics of Translation,” calls translation “the most intimate act of reading”
(400). And indeed, a translator must engage with the text she is translating on multiple
levels of meaning, discourse, and context, with a level of detail that exceeds that of the
average reader of either the original or the translated text. In order to translate well, the
translator must attempt to identify, understand, and accurately reproduce cultural and
intertextual references, double entendres, puns, ambiguous metaphors, and other kinds of double and even triple meanings as they exist in the original text—a task made as difficult by the limitations of language as by the translator’s own understanding of the text. And yet, in the end, the translator does not know the text any better than the average reader, for the beauty of translation is that a reader does not need to be an expert on literature or language to engage with a text. There is no such thing as a perfect spectator, for readers and translators alike (what is a translator other than an intimate reader who goes on to become a writer and re-writer?) approach a text with their own biases and blind spots. Nor does one wish to privilege a hierarchical understanding of art, wherein only a reader who has studied the original culture, the original language, the original “intent” or “message” of a text, is able to comment on it or gather meaning from it. The true intimacy of the work of translation lies in the translator’s ability to bring the meaning she sees in a text to light in the view of other readers, in other cultures, in other languages, letting each new pair of eyes see the beauty of the text anew. “Words and experience create each other within culture, and what should be the most direct line from one language to another, what we call ‘literal translation,’ in fact connotes incompleteness of meaning. Furthermore, the slippage that occurs when we shift from one language to another does not take place in a cultural and political vacuum,” says feminist scholar Amy Kaminsky in her book _Reading the Body Politic: Latin American Women Writers and Feminist Criticism_ (1). The necessity of imbuing a text with meaning in both cultures is even more apparent as contemporary translation begins to take shape as an act with the potential to shape meaning on a multicultural basis.
Translation, as a necessarily multicultural phenomenon, has the ability to create a community of readers around a text, bringing them together in an examination and celebration of identity and difference. According to the philosopher and cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah in his essay “Thick Translation,” “a translation aims to produce a new text that matters to one community the way another text matters to another” (425). The task of a translator, then, becomes negotiating her place within and between communities in an attempt to do justice to both. “Writing between borders and languages, many writers plot complex strategies of translating in an effort to negotiate their loyalties to nation, language, ethnicity, class, and gender,” says Azade Seyhan, transnational and postcolonial literature scholar, in her book *Writing Outside the Nation* (8). The complexity of a text is what matters the most here: what aspects of a text does a translator attempt to communicate? What aspects does she find to be uncommunicable, and for what reasons? Occasionally, a translator finds that she is uncomfortable with a text, or that she does not have sufficient understanding of the original cultural impetus toward writing to communicate a certain aspect or phrase or concept, or that she simply cannot identify with part of a text.

And yet, a good translator must attempt to communicate despite these disparities, because in order to do justice to a text, she must surrender to what it says, not what she wants it to say. The objective is not to impose her point of view onto a foreign text, but rather to make the text a bridge between the translator’s culture and the culture of the text. “When motivated by this ethical politics of difference, the translator seeks to build a community with foreign cultures, to share an understanding with and of them and to collaborate on projects founded on that understanding, going
so far as to allow it to revise and develop domestic values and institutions,” says translation theorist Lawrence Venuti in his essay “Translation, Community, Utopia” (469). Venuti talks about translation as inscribing a foreign text with domestic ideas, “domestic” referring to the culture of the translator. His view of translation is inclusive, talking about the process of translation as a production and evolution of meaning rather than an erasure of the original text: “if the domestic inscription includes part of the social or historical context in which the foreign text first emerged, then a translation can also create a community that includes foreign intelligibilities and interests, an understanding in common with another culture, another tradition” (Venuti 477). This view of translation has become more and more popular over the years, with global multiculturalism on the rise and activists and meaning-makers in many different countries moving toward a community of thought that recognizes difference as inclusive, rather than exclusive. Following the words of the postcolonial and transnational feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her book *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, “ideas are always communally wrought, not privately owned” (1), and the community of translation that springs up between a translated text, its author, its translator, and its readers in both languages is the perfect environment in which these ideas can form, grow, and flourish.

Even the translator herself has the opportunity, through translation, to interrogate herself as a reader and as a writer. According to Spivak in “The Politics of Translation,” “One of the ways to get around the confines of one’s ‘identity’ as one produces expository prose is to work at someone else’s title, as one works with a
language that belongs to many others” (397). Spivak also quotes from her “Translator’s Preface” and says that “I must overcome what I was taught in school: the highest mark for the most accurate collection of synonyms, strung together in the most proximate syntax…I surrender to the text when I translate” (398). Spivak’s idea is that a reader and translator must surrender to the text by stepping back from her presuppositions about it and just reading, being willing to identify with and be identified with the text. The translator must find a kind of love between the original text and the shadow of its translation, avoiding literalness and instead reproducing the aspects of the text that the translator can best relate to, while still recognizing and respecting the parts that she cannot identify with. Literary scholar and gender theorist Lori Chamberlain, on the other hand, talks about a more strict form of translation in her essay “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation,” referring to the “fidelity” of a translated text as one speaks of the fidelity of a sexual partner—not allowing it to stray from the original, nor reproduce outside the well-defined and outwardly imposed bonds of matrimony (312). At some point in her work, a translator must decide where she falls between fidelity and complete surrender to a text, or if her philosophy of translation lies somewhere outside that spectrum.

Perhaps due to this constant tension between the original text and its translated counterpart, translation is often devalued in the academic community. After all, is a translation not simply an inferior copy of the original? How can a translator possibly hope to convey all the complexity of the original text? The Spanish liberal philosopher and essayist José Ortega y Gasset says it best in his essay “The Misery and the Splendor of Translation,” originally published in 1937 and translated from Spanish by
Elizabeth Gamble Miller. He refers to difficult or particularly outspoken texts when he says,

To write well is to make continual incursions into grammar, into established usage, and into accepted linguistic norms. It is an act of permanent rebellion against the social environs, a subversion. To write well is to employ a certain radical courage. Fine, but the translator is usually a shy character. Because of his humility, he has chosen such an insignificant occupation. He finds himself facing an enormous controlling apparatus, composed of grammar and common usage. What will he do with the rebellious text? Isn’t it too much to ask that he also be rebellious, particularly since the text is someone else’s? He will be ruled by cowardice, so instead of resisting grammatical restraints he will do just the opposite: he will place the translated author in the prison of normal expression; that is, he will betray him. Traddutore, traditore. (50)

“Traduttori, traditore” is an Italian saying that means, more or less, “translator, traitor.” The irony in expressing this sentiment in English is that translating the phrase and making it understandable to the English speaker causes it to lose the repetitious near-rhyme of the pun in the original Italian, proving the saying’s point: no translation can ever faithfully replicate the original.

And yet, there is and should be ambiguity in translation. If a translator attempts to spell out clearly everything that she has found and analyzed in the original text, there is no reason for the reader to question the translated text, no reason for them to work toward understanding. As Spivak says in her discussion of writings about the Third World with multicultural and postcolonial feminist theorist Sneja Gunew titled “Questions of Multiculturalism,” “the person who knows has all of the problems of selfhood. The person who is known, somehow seems not to have a problematic self.
These days, it is the same kind of agenda that is at work. Only the dominant self can be problematic; the self of the Other is authentic without a problem, naturally available to all kinds of complications. This is very frightening” (66). The translator does not “know,” the reader does not “know,” and the text and its subjects are not “known”—the “self” of the reader and/or translator and the “other” of the translated text and the subjects it discusses must come together in a complex understanding of difference that privileges neither side. In the words of Katarzyna Marciniak,¹ “these kinds of things are never without tension. Embrace that tension. Why should everything be squared away and figured out?”

And indeed, some things are never truly figured out. Translation is, even at its best, essentially a failure, for there is always knowledge that cannot be communicated in exactly the same way; nuance that would take paragraphs to convey; cultural context or jokes or innuendo that even the best translator simply cannot properly express, assuming she even recognizes it in the first place. Perfection in translation is asymptotic by nature: one can approach perfection very closely, but never quite reach it. “But this approximation can be greater or lesser, to an infinite degree, and the efforts at execution are not limited, for there always exists the possibility of bettering, refining, perfecting: ‘progress,’ in short,” says Ortega y Gasset (53). However, there is always a point at which a translator must sit back and abandon her text to the world, knowing that while it may not be perfect, it is good enough.

What the best translator attempts to produce is not literal meaning but rather equivalent meaning and feeling: one leaves the syntax and exact words of the source language behind in an attempt to capture, in the target language, the way it felt to read
the original text. Ortega y Gasset argues that one must attempt to include as much of
the original context as possible; since “a repetition of a work is impossible and that the
translation is only an apparatus that carries us to it, it stands to reason that diverse
translations are fitting for the same text. It is, at least it almost always is, impossible to
approximate all the dimensions of the original text at the same time” (62). Ortega y
Gasset advocates for a perhaps less-readable but more contextually rich translation,
potentially with many footnotes, in order to truly understand the original text as much
as possible without reading it in the original language.

However, Ortega y Gasset originally published his essays on translation in the
early 20th century, and translation studies have changed and developed in the
intervening years. Many contemporary translators acknowledge that privileging the
original context over the translated context creates its own set of problems, which
stem from the argument over whether translation can be considered a creative work on
par with the high-status act of original writing. Lori Chamberlain states that

the opposition between productive and reproductive work organizes the way a culture’s values work: this
paradigm depicts originality or creativity in terms of paternity and authority, relegating the figure of the female to a variety of secondary roles. I am interested in this opposition specifically as it is used to mark the distinction between writing and translating—marking, that is, the one to be original and “masculine,” the other to be derivative and “feminine.” (314)

Chamberlain remarks that translation tends to be associated with the tag *les belles infidèles*, or the idea that a translation, like a woman, can be either beautiful or faithful, but never both (315). However, most translators would disagree with this simple dichotomy. In my experience, when translating, attempting to remain
completely faithful to the original text—syntax, phrasing, odd collocations and all—destroys the readability of the translation, thereby diminishing its ability to communicate meaning to its readers without copious use of footnotes, etc. On the other hand, allowing the meaning of the text to deviate significantly from the original in exchange for easier readability or a particularly pretty phrase undermines the point of a translation. I would say, then, that the best translations are those that seek a conscious mix of beauty and fidelity, though the comparison of translations to women is one that some translators would find complimentary, others, insulting.

Interestingly, however, the coding of translation as a feminine, reproductive act lends itself well to a reclamation that allows Third-world female translators to rebel against oppressive constructions of academic and cultural power. Chamberlain argues that “the reason translation is so overcoded, so over-regulated, is that it threatens to erase the difference between production and reproduction which is essential to the establishment of power. Translations can, in short, masquerade as originals, thereby short-circuiting the system” (322). For centuries, much of the valued production of academic and cultural meaning has come from literature produced by Western male authors, often giving relatively little value or attention to the dissident female or non-Western voices that may arise. However, these voices have gained more and more traction in the literary world, due in part to texts from so-called Third World cultures that have been translated into English, and the act of translation has become threatening because it produces texts that have the potential to hold the same value as texts originally written in English. Translation, then, can become a conveyor of discussions and ideas that threaten the previously unchallenged Western male seat of
academic and intellectual power. Chamberlain points out that “the academy’s general scorn for translation contrasts sharply with its reliance on translation in the study of the ‘classics’ of world literature, of major philosophical and critical texts” (323). The irony here is that translation done several hundred years ago has gone through this process of being disguised as the original text, but translations done today in real time are threatening precisely because they have not yet undergone this process of transformation, and therefore have not yet achieved that level of intellectual validity and acceptance.

If translation is an act with the potential to threaten established power structures, then it can become a tool of progressive movements like feminism and multiculturalism, since, as Seyhan mentions, “literature tends to record what history and public memory often forget. Furthermore, it can narrate both obliquely and allegorically, thereby preserving what can be censored and encouraging interpretation and commentary in the public sphere” (12). Through translating and studying translations, it becomes possible for the reader and translator to make certain voices heard that have previously been suppressed due to barriers of language, national origin, gender, etc. “What readings are not privileged, what is not there, what questions can't be asked?” Spivak asks in “Questions of Multiculturalism” (61). Translations of less-privileged texts can help to fill some of these gaps in literary discourse, letting previously-unheard voices speak through different languages to communicate their ideas.

And yet, asks Seyhan, “What happens when the domain of national language is occupied by nonnative writers, writers whose native, mother, home, or community
language is not the one they write in?” (8). Seyhan is writing about transnational authorship, writers in exile, but her words also apply to translation in that it is important for both translator and reader to remain conscious of the politics of difference when crossing national and literary borders. “In such a highly individualistic society as the one we belong to here, it is very comforting for a reader to consume difference as a commodity by starting with the personal difference in culture or background, which is the best way to escape the issues of power, knowledge and subjectivity raised,” says Trinh T. Minh-ha, Vietnamese filmmaker, writer and literary theorist, in her interview with author Nancy N. Chen entitled “Speaking Nearby” (Chen, Trinh 436). A conscious translator lets go of personal difference and allows the text to speak, doing her best to ignore her own biases and prejudices in order to focus on the issues raised in the text she translates. A conscious reader of a translation attempts to do the same, interrogating both the content of the original text and the accuracy of its representation in translation to see how each deals with issues of difference and subjectivity.

In “Questions of Multiculturalism,” Spivak asks, “if you are constructed in one particular kind of language, what kinds of violence does it do to your subjectivity if one then has to move into another language, and suppress whatever selves or subjectivities were constructed by the first?” (66). Though Spivak is speaking here of forcing immigrants to write in English in order to be accepted within an English-speaking country’s literary canon, her words also apply to translation in the sense that many ideas are constructed within a particular cultural and linguistic context, and function less clearly when translated into a different context. Here, the concept of
respectful, creative difference as mentioned by Trinh in her essay “Questions of Images and Politics” becomes relevant:

Many of us still hold onto the concept of difference not as a tool of creativity—to question multiple forms of repression and dominance—but as a tool of segregation—to exert power on the basis of racial and sexual essences. The apartheid-type of difference… we are trained to not hearing how voices are positioned and to not having to deal with difference otherwise than as opposition. (150)

A good translator works to hear how the different voices and issues within a text are positioned in the text’s original context, and then does her best to preserve and respect those positions when she writes her translated text. This is not always possible, due as much to the limitations of the languages and cultures involved as to the translator’s own understanding; as Trinh says in “Questions,” “working with differences requires that one faces one's own limits so as to avoid indulging in them, taking them for someone else's limits” (152). Though a perfect translation is impossible, a careful and conscious translator, with research and respect, can at least attempt to do justice to issues of difference within a translated text.

I place so much emphasis on respect, research, and awareness because there is an immense difference between quick, uncaring, literal translation and respectful, responsible translation that honors the complexity of the original text. The translator herself can never be completely free of bias, however; “the speaking or interviewing subject is never apolitical” says Trinh in “Speaking Nearby” (433). In the constantly-shifting modern world, “as cultures collide, unite, and are reconfigured in real and virtual space in unprecedented ways, postcolonial, migrant, and border-crossing
theorists and artists fine-tune received critical traditions in order to safeguard historical and cultural specificities” (Seyhan 7). Thus, the conscious, respectful translator, even as she attempts to produce and reproduce the meaning and content that is important enough to her to translate and disseminate, must do her best not to accidentally step on any toes that the original text does not purposefully step on. Having an intimate knowledge of the language and culture of the original text to be translated is absolutely necessary to ensure that a translation is getting the correct message across. Trinh discusses the idea of responsible writing in “Questions”:

A responsible work today seems to me above all to be one that shows, on the one hand, a political commitment and an ideological lucidity, and is, on the other hand interrogative by nature, instead of being merely prescriptive. In other words, a work that involves her story in history; a work that acknowledges the difference between lived experience and representation; a work that is careful not to turn a struggle into an object of consumption, and requires that responsibility be assumed by the maker as well as by the audience, without whose participation no solution emerges, for no solution exists as a given. (149)

Trinh’s words apply to original writing, but even more so to translation, as a translator attempts to represent a work without omitting or misinterpreting the message it presents. And while a translator can attempt to convey a message through her selection of a text, it is irresponsible to take a text and usurp its message because the translator thinks she knows the issue better than the original author. Some creative license is allowable, but responsible translation as Trinh refers to it places the task of loyally and accurately representing a text’s message on the translator, not on the text itself.
Yet, there is ambiguity even in responsible translation, for as Appiah says, “faced with a real live text, it seems bizarrely inappropriate to spend one’s time speculating about the author’s intentions” (423). Even the most respectful translator can only do so much to replicate what she sees as authorial intent, and at some point, she must depart from the original text and make the translation fit with its new audience. The role of the translator, then, becomes not that of a creator of meaning but rather an interpreter of a work of art, though translation remains a creative work. If the writer is a chef and the text is a recipe, the translator is another chef reading and attempting to follow that recipe and adapt it to a different taste palate; the ingredients may be very similar, the order may be the same, but the technique is necessarily different, and the translator-as-chef may find it necessary to add a few extra spices in order to make the finished dish fit together. A translator reinterprets and expresses a text, changing it as little as possible but making sure that her finished project is cohesive, compelling, and, above all, communicative.

And yet, if a translator manages to be both responsible and creative, who is she writing for—the author of the original text or the intended audience of her translated text? Or is she, in the end, merely writing for herself? Appiah has already warned against assuming authorial intent, and in “Politics,” Spivak cautions against writing for a specific audience: “if I stop to think about what is happening to the English, if I assume an audience, if I take the intending subject as more than a springboard, I cannot jump in, I cannot surrender” (406). The most difficult task for a translator hence becomes choosing between preserving the original text and making her translation appealing and understandable to the target audience. I believe that the best
translation is one that manages to be faithful to the original text, but is also coherent, compelling and connected enough to its new cultural context to make it sound like it might have originally been written in that context. Colloquial expression and cultural references, rather than being translated literally and preserved at the expense of the reader’s understanding, can be altered to expressions common within the target culture. Word order, syntax, and nuance can and perhaps should be changed in order to better fit the cadence and rhythm of the target language. *Le belle fidele* can be both beautiful and faithful, and in the end, a quality literary translation “aims at producing a text whose relation both to the literary and to the linguistic conventions of the culture of the translation is relevantly like the relations of the object-text to its culture’s conventions” (Appiah 425). That is to say, a text that aims not to reproduce what the author was “trying to say” with the original, but rather a text that replicates in the target language how it feels to read the original text.

The first question that is raised with this philosophy, however, is the issue of responsibility and authority. Even as the translator is changing things within a text to better fit her target culture, she may find herself asking, “Can I say this?” and “What right do I have to say this?” in regards to details in both the original text and her translations. When it comes to potentially transgressive elements in a text, does a translator who has a different cultural, racial, or gender identity from the subject speaking in a text have the right to translate their words and transgress in turn? Especially when talking about potentially sensitive subjects, who has the authority to speak, and who has the authority to be listened to? It is difficult not to usurp a speaker’s authority when one is, for example, translating Ecuadorian women’s texts
from the comparatively more powerful position of a white, middle-class American woman. The risk of imposing Eurocentric ideas and taboos is strong, for, according to Trinh,

marginalized peoples are herded to mind their own business. So that the area, the "homeland" in which they are allowed to work remains heavily marked, whereas the areas in which Euro-Americans' activities are deployed can go on unmarked. One is here confined to one's own culture, ethnicity, sexuality and gender. And that's often the only way for insiders within the marked boundaries to make themselves heard or to gain approval. (443)

A North American writer can speak anywhere, whereas a marginalized writer can only speak within a confined area; it is all too easy to accidentally overwrite that bounded voice, if one is not careful. And in translation, there are additional pitfalls to speaking as a marginalized person has spoken, whether as the author of a text or as a subject speaking within a text, for the question of whether translation can function as appropriation is complicated one. Appropriating the authority to speak about a subject, since a translator is functioning as an institutionalized academic authority, is a too-real danger. Kaminsky warns of the potential to accidentally impose upon a text, even when one does not appear to be translating from a position of power: “feminists in North America may be disempowered within their own culture…but they are far from disempowered with respect to their objects of study when these are from the developing world” (4). A feminist translator with a particularly critical eye might feel the urge to edit her translation in order to make it fit with her preconceptions of Latin American feminism, for example, running the risk of disregarding the details of the original text.
However, debating who has the “right to criticize” regarding translation and transgressive texts is as unproductive as debating who has the authority to speak. Spivak says in “Questions” that regardless of one’s right or authority, speaking out is the best course of action: “in one way you take a risk to criticize, of criticizing something which is Other—something which you used to dominate. I say that you have to take a certain risk: to say "I won't criticize" is salving your conscience, and allowing you not to do any homework” (62-63). Egyptian feminist writer and activist Nawal El Saadawi agrees, saying in her essay “Dissidence and Creativity” that “creative dissidence does not believe in the dichotomy 'god-devil' or 'self-other'. Both are to be challenged and criticized equally. This means directing a critical gaze at the self as well as at the other” (164-165). A responsible translator, then, must look at the text she is translating and recognize its flaws at the same time as she respects them. Just because a text is not “politically correct” in the language she is translating into does not mean that she should neuter its message with the intent of making it more acceptable to her intended audience. That is neither her authority nor her responsibility; her ideal should be to let the text speak as clearly as possible, remembering always Jose Ortega y Gasset’s warning against placing the translated author “in the prison of normal expression” by choosing to de-radicalize a radical text.

However, it is imperative to always keep in mind that a translator is not the original author of a work, and approaches the subjects within a work from a necessarily outside point of view. For example, as a North American woman, my personal views and experiences have been very different than those of the Latin American women speaking through the texts that I translate. Therefore, what I seek as
a translator and a feminist examining these works is not to speak as one of these women, or even to speak about them, but to speak nearby them. Trinh coins this philosophy in “Speaking Nearby,” calling it,

in other words, a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it... To say therefore that one prefers not to speak about but rather to speak nearby, is a great challenge. Because actually, this is not just a technique or a statement to be made verbally. It is an attitude in life, a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world. (443)

Speaking nearby a subject, a translator can lessen the risk of identifying herself as something she is not and therefore obscuring or usurping the speech of less-privileged voices. As Trinh says in “Speaking Nearby,” “I can only speak while learning to keep silent, for the risk of jeopardizing someone's reputation and right to speech is always present” (436). Respectful and responsible translation can, at the very least, lessen this risk, as long as a translator is aware that she is promoting others’ speech and not speaking herself.

There is still danger even in this “speaking nearby,” however, for one runs the risk of attempting to define what is ajeno, the Spanish word for “not yours,” by what is tuyo, “yours.” As Saadawi says in reference to her own culture, “we Egyptian women are considered ignorant of our culture. We have to be guided by American experts. They mediate our experience for us and then sell back to us their image of ourselves” (170). It is necessary to avoid this kind of condescending filtering as much as possible when one is examining other texts and other cultures; one must always
remember to approach a text with respect for its original context, rather than trying to impose one’s own cultural and historical biases. However, Saadawi also criticizes “the production and consumption of dissident words kept at a safe distance from real struggle” (174). A truly excellent and involved translator is not just academically familiar with what she translates—its literary context, its cultural context, its historic and politico-socioeconomic context—she also identifies with and is interested in the issues her texts discuss, even if she has not experienced those struggles herself. She tries not to be caught in the trap of the intellectual, academic feminist who, disconnected from the issues she so earnestly discusses, neglects to consider the visceral reality of the struggles of the people she talks about in her clean, warm, well-lit classrooms, half a world away. Saadawi rejects this kind of disconnected dissidence:

A dissident writer is both a philosopher and an activist. A philosopher who is not an activist in a struggle ends up as an empty shell: as a shelf of books in academia. S/he struggles in closed rooms, using words to fence with other users of words. S/he has a love-hate relationship with poor oppressed women and men who are struggling to live. S/he worships them, calls them the 'subaltern', glorifies their authentic identity or culture, but at the same time looks down on them, considers them as docile or struggling bodies unable to produce philosophy or as local activists but not global thinkers. S/he abolishes subaltern philosophies and replaces them on the global intellectual scene; s/he becomes the philosopher of the subaltern who knows more about them than they know about themselves. (170)

Perhaps the most difficult thing to remember, when translating dissident works that speak of struggles the translator herself has not experienced, is that the authors of the
texts she translates are real people. They have experienced horrors and joys great and small and it is these experiences that have inspired these authors to write. The translator, no matter how much she studies, does not and cannot know these issues better than the subjects who speak of them, nor is it her responsibility to overwrite or correct an imperfect or politically incorrect text. A responsible translation represents the text, nothing more and nothing less. Creative license is encouraged to a point, but when a translator stops doing justice to a text and begins doing injustice to it instead, she has failed not just as a translator but as a creative voice herself. It is a difficult line to walk, especially for someone just beginning to find their way in the discipline, but when translating well, maintaining the balance between beauty and fidelity is as important as maintaining the balance between interpretation and responsibility.

In short, while the act of translation is simultaneously political, ethical, and personal, nowhere is it a derivative act. Neither is a translation a derivative or inferior work of art, a version of the original text; rather, a translation is its own unique text, a reimagining of the original work in the same sense that a film made out of a book is its own original work. The ideas may be the same, but the translator must reimagine not only the words but also the cultural references, the phrasing, the rhythm, the feel and the sound and the look of the text. And this reimagination begins when the translator chooses the text she wants to translate, what kind of meaning she wants to communicate, what kind of message she wants to share with the world. From there, according to Lawrence Venuti,

the foreign text…is not so much communicated as inscribed with domestic intelligibilities and interests. The inscription begins with the very choice of a text for
This is where the idea of translation as a political and ethical work comes in, because the language and culture of an original text can greatly affect how its translation is selected and received. “The status of a language in the world is what one must consider when teasing out the politics of translation,” says Spivak in “Politics” (407), and while she is writing about non-Western languages, this statement also applies when translating from lesser-valued languages into privileged languages like English. Especially when attempting to communicate progressive ideas, one “cannot translate from a position of monolinguist superiority” (Spivak 410), believing that the language one translates into is somehow better than the language one is translating from. In that position, one risks invoking the dangers of what Mohanty has called “discursive colonization,” the process of appropriating and codifying subjects in the non-Western world using only references that have been articulated in the Eurocentric world (333). Rather, Spivak prioritizes doing justice to the message in a text and bringing it to a wider audience: “It is more just to give access to the largest number of feminists. Therefore these texts must be made to speak English. It is more just to speak the language of the majority when through hospitality a large number of feminists give the foreign feminists the right to speak, in English” (399). It is precisely due to this idea of justice and just-ness that I myself have chosen to translate from the perhaps less-valued language of Spanish into my own native English. I do not believe that these texts speak better in English; I believe that they have something to say that the
English-speaking literary and feminist communities have not yet heard spoken in this particular manner. To me, it is “more just” to give these texts another way of speaking that will help their message spread, and hopefully, in turn, spark more interest in examining the original texts.

That is not to say that these texts need my help to speak. However, to many, the work of a translator is to ensure that the message inherent in a text can be disseminated to a wider audience. In the case of the texts I have translated for this project, that audience is both the English-speaking literary community and the part of the Spanish-speaking community that might, at times, place a greater value on texts in English than on their own literature, or at the very least find more reason to examine texts that have been found “worthy” of being translated into English.

---

1 In personal conversation during an HTC tutorial
Translating Contemporary Female Ecuadorean Authors

I first visited Ecuador in the spring of 2014 on a mandatory study abroad program that spanned seventeen weeks and three different cities. While taking classes with an Ecuadorian language-learning institution in the small mountain city of Cuenca, I realized that this was the first time I had ever even heard of an Ecuadorian author. Countries like Chile, Argentina, and even Colombia frequently produce authors and texts that are read and praised both inside and outside of Latin America, but authors from smaller countries like Ecuador are infrequently read and even infrequently critically analyzed. And even the class that I took in Ecuador about Latin American literature rarely mentioned Ecuadorian authors, and never female Ecuadorian authors. As I returned to the United States and began searching for a thesis topic, my mind fell on the mystery of the seemingly voiceless female Ecuadorian: someone had to be writing about her, but who, and how could I find those authors and those texts?

After several months of research in the United States, I returned to Ecuador in the summer of 2015, searching through libraries, archives, and the private bookshelves of the handful of female Ecuadorian authors I had managed to contact from the States via email, looking for texts with interesting premises and compelling prose with the intent to translate them. After several months of interviewing authors, searching for texts, and reading and comparing stories, I chose five short stories, one from each of five different authors: Solange Rodríguez Pappe, Gabriela Alemán, Sonia Manzano, Aminta Buenaño, and Luz Argentina Chiriboga. Brief biographies of each author can
be found before my translation of each story, but despite the authors’ differences in
age, race, upbringing, and writing style, all of the stories I chose to translate have
something in common: they are about women. Rodríguez’s story tells of a house with
a perfect nuclear family above ground and three kept women hidden in the basement,
trying to free themselves and their sisters who are imprisoned by the locks on the
house’s doors. Alemán takes on the voice of a waitress in New Orleans to tell a story
of female infidelity and identity crisis, using the character’s memory-challenged
mother to draw generational parallels. Manzano uses references to Greek mythology
to talk about male infidelity and the problem of sexuality in older women. Buenaño
speaks with the voice of an aging woman who wonders if she has ever loved in her life
and is forced to confront the dilemma of gratifying but unwanted desire. Chiriboga
takes readers to post-slavery Ecuador to talk about a black woman inheriting the land
and the legacy of an aging white man. Black, white, mestizo, young, old, faithful,
unfaithful, beautiful, undesirable—the voices that speak through these five stories are
unmistakably female, and the tales they tell all come from a uniquely female
perspective. It was not an easy search, but I finally found the Ecuadorian women’s
voices I had been searching for.

I chose to translate these five stories partially because, as Kaminsky mentions,
“the Colombian novelist Albalucía Angel has remarked, a little ruefully, that the only
people she ever sees reading novels by Latin American women are other women”
(Kaminsky xi). In translation, these stories have a better chance of being read by
audiences not just in English-speaking countries, but around the world. Additionally,
Kaminsky remarks that “much Latin American feminist literary analysis is being
written—or at least being published—in the United States” (9), proving that there is at least some critical literary interest in these kinds of texts. Ecuadorian literature does not have a high status even within the country itself, and if these texts are made to speak English, they have a higher chance of at least being discussed. And yet, “the racism and xenophobia that results in this country’s devaluation of the Spanish language also devalues the thinking that is expressed in that language” (Kaminsky 1). The United States tends to look down upon its Latin American neighbors, thinking them less advanced, a world still in development rather than one that has simply developed differently. My intent in translating these works and introducing them to the English-speaking American literary world is to put yet another dent in this flawed and condescending view of Latin American literature.

Will H. Corral, in his entry on Ecuador in the *Handbook of Latin American Literature*, calls Ecuador “a small country of uneven literary production” (287), an accurate description that nonetheless does not quite do justice to Ecuador’s rich and varied literary history, from its origins in the oral “literature” of the indigenous cultures of the Andes Mountains before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors to the written literature of today. The pre-Columbian cultural groups that inhabited the territory that would one day become Ecuador generally did not have a system of writing to record their songs, dances, and dramas, and so almost all physical evidence of this rich oral tradition was destroyed as religious heresy by the conquering Spaniards in their constant drive to repress indigenous culture.² During the era of colonialization, Latin American and Ecuadorian literature was mostly written in imitation of continental literature, often taking Latin American subject matter and
expressing it through Spanish styles of poetry and prose. However, when the colonies began to think of freeing themselves from oppressive Spanish rule, literature in the Americas became more revolutionary, as poets and authors tried incorporating new styles and social topics into their writing. Ecuador’s official independence in the 19th century was marked by a surge in nationalistic romanticism, still slightly in imitation of the European styles of the time but focused on the formation of a national Ecuadorian identity.

The 20th century saw Ecuador move into the modernist age in poetry while prose went the route of regionalism and social documentary, especially in the 1930s with the Guayaquil Group and Jorge Icaza’s novel Huasipungo, Ecuador’s most famous novel, which is a revelation of the life of the oppressed indigenous groups of rural Ecuador. Due to a relative economic upturn in the mid-20th century, Ecuador also became “one of the first Spanish American countries to found an institution—Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana (House of Ecuadorian Culture; 1944)—responsible for explicit cultural policy” (Corral 288). The Latin American “Boom” in the 1970s, caused by economic and social changes, marked a fruitful new age in Ecuadorian literature as well, with many authors and poets exploring the borders of what, exactly, can be called literature.

The “Boom” was also responsible for the beginning of the emergence of Ecuador’s contemporary female writers, who began making a name for themselves among the crowd of already-established male writers. The most famous female Ecuadorian author is inarguably Alicia Yánez Cossío (1929—), who has published poetry, drama, short stories, and novels, some of which have been translated into
English. According to Corral, “the analyses of these works, still uneven or fixated on applying foreign feminist models to a different reality, have had the positive impact of empowering the recovery of the high quality of women’s writing in Ecuador” (307).

Before Cossío came onto the scene, the majority of Ecuadorian female authors had published poetry or social justice texts, but Cossío and her contemporary, the novelist Eugenia Viteri, began a new surge of female prose writers. Many of these writers, often inspired by parents who read or wrote or taught literature, started their careers in the literary workshops, or talleres, of Miguel Donoso Pareja and other famed Ecuadorian authors, and then went on to publish a book or two of short stories before fading into obscurity. Other women had no idea that a career as a writer was even a possibility until, later in life, after marriage and a career, they found that their creative impulse gave them no choice but to write. Those female authors who decided to pursue writing, however, turned to the Casa de la Cultura or one of Ecuador’s few larger publishing companies to publish their works; some of them joined forces and founded smaller, independent publishing houses. The female Ecuadorian authors of today are numerous, though most are not well known even within their own country due to the lack of publishing infrastructure and the general population’s disinclination toward reading for entertainment. It is rare that an Ecuadorian author, male or female, can make a living solely from their writing career; hence, most of them find other jobs working as lawyers, professors, or government workers. Those who continue to write often find difficulty publishing or promoting their written works.
Unfortunately, there is a decided prejudice, conscious or unconscious, against women’s literature in Ecuador, as there is in much of the Latin American world. As Kaminsky notes, even the Spanish language is slightly prejudiced against women:

_Escritor_ [writer] is, grammatically, a masculine noun. That it is also semantically masculine is revealed by the use of a feminized form, _escritora_, to refer to a woman who writes. Furthermore, differential value is attached to feminine forms of nouns, when grammatical gender follows embodied, social gender. The word _poetisa_ is still much more common in Spanish than “poetess” in English, and only minimally less pejorative; _la poeta_ still rings wrong to many. Some grammatical formations seem to refuse women’s participation in certain activities. (6)

Some Ecuadorian women writers prefer to be known as simply _autor_, author, rather than the feminized form, _autora_, though others believe this distinction to be unnecessarily feminist. Another aspect of this prejudice against women writers can stem from the idea that female literature is “light” or “pulpy,” like telenovelas and fashion magazines. The typical masculine prejudice is that women write about little things, their little loves, their little nonconformities, but that nothing they produce is truly deep, says Donoso Pareja, summarizing prevalent Ecuadorian attitudes toward women’s literature in the introduction to his anthology of Ecuadorian women’s short stories (13). Unfortunately, the prejudice that women’s literature is somehow lesser is often based in the very real fact that there are few Ecuadorian women writers who have produced truly outstanding material in the last two or three decades, though Pareja is quick to point out that there is always at least one representative in each generation whose short stories are worthy of anthologizing (20). In general, Corral observes that Ecuadorian literature tends to be
as developed as that of any other country of the continent, but oddly lacking in recent times in 1) a self-reflexive critical tradition that is on a par [sic] with its representative works, and 2) the informed selectivity that allows other countries to discern between naïve texts and those that reach an international readership beyond nationalistic desiderata, without the help of literary cronyism. (298-99)

Additionally, according to Donoso Pareja, Ecuador’s literary production in general is lower than much of Latin America, “in part because our editorial development is small, and also because we have less-than-wonderful reading habits” [en parte porque nuestro desarrollo editorial es pequeño, y también porque tenemos hábitos deficitarios de la lectura]” (Pareja 13). Thus, it seems that the lack of truly compelling Ecuadorian literature that provokes intense analysis and criticism is not limited to the female authorial sphere; it is merely more obvious there due to the relatively smaller sample size, since there are simply fewer female writers than there are male.

Spivak posits in “Politics” that when it comes to translation of women’s literature, “the person who is translating must have a rough sense of the specific terrain of the original, so that she can fight the racist assumption that all Third World women’s writing is good” (Spivak 405). And indeed, my own search for works of quality female authors of Ecuador, limited to short story writers who had published since the year 2000, revealed that, in keeping with the phenomenon described above, there was a comparatively small portion that I would call compelling literature. One day, I was sitting in the national library in Quito, the capital of Ecuador, looking at the two bookshelves that contained the entirety of that library’s collection of short stories published by women since the founding of the country, and I realized that of the fifty
or so anthologies I had found that had been published in the last 15 years, I had skimmed perhaps ten or fifteen that I found truly compelling. And when I went looking for these somewhat-promising books of short stories in the local Ecuadorian bookstores, only three or four were actually available, usually in a section labeled “Ecuadorian literature” or “national literature” and tucked discreetly away, out of sight of the translations of American bestsellers and novels by Argentinian or Chilean authors. It seems, then, that though Ecuador is currently experiencing a relative surge in female writing, the effects of said surge have only slowly begun making their way into the reading population, which tends to be biased not just against female writers, but against Ecuadorian authorship in general.

However, the texts that I did find are, in my opinion, outstanding in their field. Rodríguez Pappe, Alemán, Manzano, Buenaño and Chiriboga each present a different style of writing—Rodríguez Pappe tends toward the fairy-tale-esque with her poetic prose and magical realism-type narration of women’s escape from literal and metaphorical oppression, for example, while Alemán’s story of infidelity and identity crisis is told in sparse, occasionally bleak vernacular. But despite the thematic differences in their work, the common thread that runs throughout these authors’ writing is in their treatment of women. Female voices speak clearly through these authors’ works, and the stories I chose to translate for this project showcase the abilities of women—privileged women, poor women, black women, mestizo women, old women, young women, Ecuadorian and non-Ecuadorian women, all living their lives despite infidelity, abuse, harassment, and prejudice, all telling their stories for the world to hear. While relegating women’s works to a specific category of literature
may at times seem problematic, I also think it is important that these specifically female voices are speaking out about their experiences and telling their stories. As Kaminsky states,

There is a particular set of experiences women record in their texts that speak to other women, because there is a subversion of language that allows us to speak, because there is a tale of oppression, yes, but also of resistance in the very fact that women have claimed the power of the word. Readings of women’s writing on these assumptions do not make demands on the content—or even the form—of the text, but first celebrate the very existence of women-authored texts as a testimony to survival, and then scrutinize those texts for strategies that account for that survival. (19)

Solange Rodríguez Pappe’s characters, for example, in their tale of literal and allegorical survival under the fist of patriarchal captivity, recount a story that is unmistakably told from a uniquely female perspective—one that might be relatable to women living not-so-dissimilar experiences around the world.

However, it is important to consider that just because these stories were written by women and about women, it does not necessarily mean that all of their experiences are inherently relatable to all women. When reading Latin American works, especially in translation, both reader and translator must be careful to avoid essentializing the Latin American woman as a monolithic figure, an oppressed or downtrodden victim in need of saving from her developing country’s less-than-enlightened patriarchal attitudes. As Spivak notes, “the presupposition that women have a natural or narrative-historical solidarity, that there is something in a woman or an undifferentiated women’s story that speaks to another woman without benefit of language-learning, might stand against the translator’s task of surrender” (400). That does not mean that
these stories, and other stories by Latin American women writers, cannot talk about
women rising above their struggles, merely that those types of stories are not the only
ones that can be told. Kaminsky points out that the most important thing to remember
is that the women who write these stories—and the female characters in said stories—
are not oppressed, featureless monoliths, but individual humans with unique stories to
tell. For progressive feminists in Eurocentric “first world” countries, “many of whom
tend to see all women in developing countries as downtrodden victims, Latin
American feminist work can show the resistance and the agency of women—women
who are not only the object of the neocolonialist male gaze and the creation of the
capitalist patriarchal mind, but also the subjects of their own lives” (Kaminsky 20).
Candelaria, the young black woman in Chiriboga’s story, is not just a stand-in for all
black former slaves; like Chiriboga herself, Candelaria is a woman with a history of
love, loss, and labor who makes the decision to take her life and her legacy into her
own hands and make something with it—Candelaria with her land, Chiriboga with her
writing. As Kaminsky says, “not every tale is a story of gendered sex, not all stories
are national allegories” (136). Sometimes a story is meant to be just a story and a
character just a character; not every work is written with the intent to have far-
reaching political implications and consequences. However, that does not mean that an
insightful reader or translator cannot interpret stories and characters as they wish,
lending, for example, a feminist perspective to these works.

Interestingly enough, though I did approach and translate these texts from a
feminist perspective, the authors of these stories might not identify their works as
feminist texts. Many of the authors I interviewed identified themselves as supportive
of feminism, but not as feminists themselves; others said that while they counted
themselves as feminists, they do not write feminist works. There is an essential
difference, according to Donoso Pareja, between views of female and feminist
literature in Ecuador:

The first term often implies a negative meaning that has
been associated with much of the literature called “pulp”
telenovelas, sentimental novels and fashion magazines).
Feminist material… is, in contrast, dedicated literature that
works toward women’s liberation. [El primer término
implica a menudo un significado negativo puesto que se lo ha
asociado con mucho de la literatura llamada pulp (i.e.,
telenovelas, novelones sentimentales y revistas de modas).
El materia feminista…es (en cambio) literatura
comprometida que trabaja por la liberación de la mujer].
(12)

While the authors I interviewed were quite proud to be recognized as writing female
literature, their opinions on writing specifically feminist literature were mixed. There
is absolutely nothing wrong with these authors not identifying their works as feminist.
As Kaminsky mentions, “it is not difficult to understand how conservative forces shore
up their ideology with recourse to traditional androcentric notions of womanly
obedience and idealization that enclose and exalt womanhood, fetter women’s
sexuality, and maintain male privilege…these cultural and psychological roots can
only be dislodged at a certain psychic expense” (16). And indeed, some of these
works, regardless of authorial intent, do not hold up what North American feminists
might consider progressive views and values. It could be argued, for example, that
Manzano’s character Leda comes to terms with her identity and her husband’s
infidelity only by seeking out patriarchal male attention and perpetuating the same
negative cycle of infidelity. Buenaño’s female protagonist’s mixed fear and fascination
with her aggressive stalker is not necessarily reflective of feminist independence. However, I did not select these texts for their progressive, feminist views, but rather for their salient female voices, and not all females, Latin American or otherwise, are necessarily feminists. Nonetheless, choosing to look at these stories from a feminist perspective lends richness to the texts and forces reader and translator alike to question their own hermeneutic habits even as they take a critical approach to the text.

Furthermore, it is important to approach a feminist interpretation with the knowledge that said interpretation will, like any other perspective, be specific to a reader’s cultural, historical, and geographical context. One must be conscious of Spivak’s adage that “there is nothing necessarily meretricious about the western feminist gaze” (399). Kaminsky also mentions that it is very difficult for North American feminists to recognize their way of thinking “not as normative but as only one mode of being out of many” (23). The community of readers that surrounds these texts will likely have slightly different approaches and interpretations of these works, some of them contradictory. However, that community of readers is nonetheless a community, an unlikely coalition of interpreters who, in merely reading these texts, are taking risks and perhaps challenging their unconscious assumptions about Latin American women. Readers consume texts that are relatable to them, and I hope that as readers relate to these texts that I have translated, they will become more conscious of the “responsibility that we as readers, critics and political actors have in addressing these texts” (Kaminsky 26), of realizing that each perspective is valid, but also that each reader must question their own thinking as well as criticizing the texts they consume. As Mohanty says,
The interwoven processes of sexism, racism, misogyny, and heterosexism are an integral part of our social fabric, wherever in the world we happen to be. We need to be aware that these ideologies, in conjunction with the regressive politics of ethnic nationalism and capitalist consumerism, are differentially constitutive of all of our lives in the twenty-first century. (3)

I believe that the five stories I have translated for this project each have qualities that are relatable to readers around the world. One does not need to be a woman, a feminist, or an Ecuadorian in order to enjoy these works, and the different perspectives that each new reader lends to the interpretation of these stories enrich not just the stories, but also the literary community surrounding them.

In questioning these stories and their interpretation, one must also question my translations of these works. I chose these stories because I identify with and appreciate the stories and the struggles that they convey; I may feel that I have done these works justice, or that I have done them a disservice, but regardless of my feelings toward them, I have translated them because I think they have something to say that others need to hear. As Saadawi says, “if you are creative, you must be dissident. You discover what others have not yet discovered. You may be alone at the beginning, but somehow you feel responsible towards yourself and others: towards those who are not yet aware of this discovery, who share your struggle with the system” (160). There are other readers who I think will identify with the struggles shared in these stories, who may not be aware that these stories exist but who may, through my translations, hear the words they need to be creative and dissident themselves. I am not the perfect translator for these texts, but there is no such thing as a perfect translator. But while I will never be an unproblematic translator, I can call myself a good translator of these
texts because I am inspired by them and genuinely wish to work with them and share them. The best translations, in my opinion, are those that are written by someone who picks up a text and says to herself, *I need to share this with the world.*

In the end, the question of “Why translate these texts?” comes down to that simple desire to share what might be otherwise inaccessible. I think Trinh says it best: “Let me start by asking myself: what do I expect from a film? What I expect is borne out by what I work at bringing forth in my own films. The films I make, in other words, are made to contribute to the body of film works I like and would like to see” (147). Substitute “literary works” for “films” and you have my intent: I would like to see more works by female Ecuadorian writers. I would like to see more Latin American texts translated into English and shared with the English-speaking literary community. I would like to see more complicated, problematic female characters speaking out about their stories, thereby making them real people in their readers’ eyes. According to Seyhan, storytelling and translating is the best (and only) way of passing on knowledge and telling stories in the way that we wish them to be told: “We engage in history not only as agents and actors but also as narrators or storytellers…The work of commemoration is often the only means of releasing our (hi)stories from subjugation to official or institutionalized regimes of forgetting” (4). In translating these stories, I have become a narrator myself, making these texts speak another language and tell their stories to another audience. Those who read my translations will go on to interpret them, comment on them, and thereby commemorate them, ensuring that the ideas and inspiration that they have to share will continue to be heard.
See Arias Robalino, *Panorama de la literatura ecuatoriana*.

See Corral, “Ecuador.”

See Corral.

See Corral. *Huasipungo* was published in 1934, then edited and republished in 1953 and 1960 (the definitive version). Translations by Mervyn Savill (1962) and Bernard H. Dulsey (1964) have been published in English; each is problematic in its own way and shows an interesting example of the debate between loyalty and readability as goals of translation.

As expressed to Julianna Coleman in a series of personal interviews conducted during the summer of 2015. Recordings of these interviews were approved by the Institutional Review Board.

See interviews.

See interviews.
Que cuenten las mujeres

or

Let the Women Speak

Five short stories
by contemporary female Ecuadorian authors

Translated from Spanish by Julianna Coleman
Under the supervision of Dr. Betsy Partyka
With many thanks
Solange Rodríguez Pappe

Solange Rodríguez Pappe (1976) was born in the coastal city of Guayaquil, Ecuador. She studied literature and communications at the Universidad Católica de Santiago de Guayaquil and the Universidad Andina de Quito. She is one of the most well-known authors of science fiction and fantasy in Ecuador, and she frequently uses the strange and the fantastic as avenues of exploration in her academic research and in her creative writing. Rodríguez has also been a journalist and teacher in addition to her writing career. She has published six collections of short stories, winning the national Ecuadorian Joaquín Gallegos Lara award in 2010 for her collection *Balas perdidas*.

One, Two, Three and Four

I am Two. One lives on the surface—before, it was easy for me to hear the little noises she made while she wandered around the house singing, clanging pots together or tapping around in her high-heeled shoes. Not anymore. Three and Four, who are in the cellar with me now, don’t let me listen to her because they spend all their time concocting secret plans to escape and take over the floor above. In the winter cold, both of them sleep entangled in the same creaky-sprunged bed: Three lying on Four’s huge breasts or encircling her with her legs with a familiarity so inexplicable that their embrace fills me with real repugnance.

The two of them have become an affectionate knot that does not suffer from the cold despite the thin blankets that Bluebeard gave us. “Come here,” says Four to me while Three sleeps drooling onto her gigantic breasts, “there is room for one more.” I turn my back on them and curl in on myself. I hug myself. We all prefer not to touch each other, but there are nights that I wish I wanted to because I feel like the heat has gone from my body until only cold tendons are left. Since Three and Four arrived to live in this cellar, I am becoming, little by little, nothing more than leather and bones.

Life in the Cisterns
There are women who are not seen; women in the wells; women under the beds; women under the earth; underground women; women in the drawers; mole women who have been born like that and have no idea how to move toward the surface; women splashing in the sewers; rats with women’s hips and women’s sex; buried women who, like me, are slowly rotting. Since my earliest memory, I have been Two and I have lived in the cellar of this house, which becomes an oven or an icebox with the change of seasons. I have lived silently in this space that is the eventual destination of all the dirty and broken things that aren’t needed. I have been here forever, always listening to the clattering of floorboards over my head, breathing dust, woodworms and the gloomy green smell of the damp; but I remain because I am near the man that I love, the man with a hard sex and a short, very blue beard. When he can, he escapes from the tight knot of One’s arms that keeps him captive on the surface and descends discreetly to see me. No, the correct word is see us, the three of us, but I know that if he comes, he comes for me, and that the other two were brought to me from the outside only to keep me company when he cannot.

**Description of the Master**

At sunset, I would anticipate his voice, which I had learned to separate from the rest of the noise of the house, his heavy breathing drawing near to the steps that separate this world from the one upstairs. I would count the footsteps until I saw him appear, always splendid with a new gift, something to put on the endless shelves with their accumulated bolts, mothballs, candies, coins, and breadcrumbs that no one would miss where he came from. “How is my little night owl?” the man I loved asked
playfully, and I ran happily to his arms, and he closed his hands around my waist, encircling it with a delicious squeeze. That’s what loving someone is about, I learned. Putting your neck between his fingers and waiting to suffocate so you can faint onto his chest. Putting a knife in his hands and hoping that he doesn’t cut you. That is love.

**Change of Season**

When it rains, I almost never sleep, I lay with my eyes open while Four and Three devote themselves to their murmurs and later to a heavy breathing that transforms into snoring and whale song. Four sometimes talks in her sleep and wonders what the world above would be like. She imagines it through its sounds and the changing temperatures; she believes that it is full of flowers, not like the plastic flowers that Bluebeard brings us. She imagines them giant, inhabitable, edible. I speak little of my secret excursions to the world above, that I know that before, there was a happy woman and children and trees and a dog. Now I have no idea; it has been a long time since I last heard her sing beneath all the noise.

Sometimes, when Three can’t sleep, she asks me to show her the objects that I’ve taken when I go upstairs tentatively, because our cellar is very dark. On the floor, I unfold a velvety tablecloth where I’ve packed some scattered things that I stole from above. We run our hands over sunglasses, coins, a pendant, a knife, a nail clipper, a sock, a piece of chocolate. “One cried a lot because she thought she had lost this gold pendant,” I say, showing her. We know that, in reality, no one loses anything, objects just move from one owner to another, and more than once it’s likely that they’ve been taken by the women who live in the cellars.
Three, as always, lets out an overexcited and hysterical cry and Four tries to calm her. Three wants to go upstairs, kill the children, poison the dog, set fire to the house and then leave, filled with peace.

“You don’t know anything,” Four says to her. “Two will guide us,” she replies, “Two will lead the conquest of the world above.”

Three thinks that when Bluebeard doesn’t have anything left, when we have made off with everything, then his only option will be to stay with us.

When this happens, he will have to descend forever to the cellar or make us go upstairs.

“Men don’t live in cellars,” I say to Three, “Men built the cellars.” “Let’s leave, then?” asks Three, nervously twisting her cold child’s hands.

I keep my mouth shut.

**The State of the Inhabitant**

There is a proliferation of infinite cellars where the subterranean women come together: changed women, clever women, little girls, women who have gone astray and have ended up playing in these cellars that connect with cupboards and sewers and tombs where the women that have been buried alive have only their voices to communicate, to sing and howl. Those muffled sounds that one hears at night are the women of the cellars going upstairs, committing petty thefts, taking treasures from another time that remind them of their condition as nocturnal scavengers.
In reality, I am only a theorist of the world, a pathetic and erudite being who will leave everything behind at the first caring touch from the man who mounts her and will start skittering toward him like the eager subterranean creature that I am.

The women of the cellar have problems with our temperature; we are cold, we are very pale; we have the instincts of moles and very dark hair. In every respectable home there is usually one woman upstairs and two or three in the cellar for the bad times. That is how fragile men are.

**Dreams**

I dream about One, painful nightmares. There is nothing that my unconscious has decided to hide: it is far from the incomprehensible language of dreams; everything is obvious. In one of the dreams, One and I have to travel in a small car and so we sit together in the backseat. For some reason we sit very close together, so that I feel her body close to mine, making me uncomfortable. One and I put our legs next to each other. Her thigh is browned by the sun and has tiny golden hairs like a puppy’s. Mine is a creamy yellow tone, like the color of bones.

We are very different; this is the obvious thing of the dream. To avoid seeing it, I pull my black dress downward but it doesn’t give an inch. One and I cannot avoid seeing the contrast of our skin. I look at her hands, pretty and with polished nails. She has gold rings on her fingers. One of them is bound by a wedding ring.

In another dream, I hide myself among the clothes in One’s closet: colorful clothing, patterned with flowers and gourds; it is the clothing of a woman who goes out, who shows her shoulders and who enjoys being in the sun. I feel rage toward One,
rage because she can go out and wear her high heels, rage because she doesn’t know that her happiness has been made possible by the bodies of three women who live in a cellar. Rage because I decide that someone who laughs all the time can’t be anything more than an idiot. So I leave the closet and steal what I think is prettiest, five or six dresses, what I can carry quickly. I go down the stairs and open the door onto a bright day. I run.

Since I don’t know very well how the outside world is lit, the whole dream is green and full of filaments and weeds that grow from the floor. I run more and I run barefoot over the bare soil until I get tired and I have to lie down. Behind my eyelids, everything is burning. I doze.

Later, a well-dressed man approaches me and says that he is going to arrest me for stealing One’s clothes, that I must return to the house and ask for forgiveness in front of everyone for what I did. Then my decision surprises me; I think: I would rather die than be humiliated like that. Cellars are very shameful. So I run to a high place several meters above ground and throw myself off to receive the final blow.

Sometimes, only sometimes, in the world above, after all the moans of love, which are distinct from the panting painful gasps of Three and Four, someone cries. It sounds like the voice of One also having nightmares; I wonder if she will dream that there is a woman in the cellar who pilfers her things.

**Anatomy**

“Naked men are so strange!” Three says to me: “They have this rigid and ugly tool that they hurt you with, yet at the same time, you desire the pain. There is force,
there is battle, but there is also the desire to abandon yourself and lose this war where to surrender is to be victorious. I think if I had a weapon equal to that one, instead of surrendering myself, I would fight.”

“I don’t know what you would want to fight for; to leave, Three? Outside, above all else, there are men armed with many empty cellars.”

“I don’t want to leave,” Three says to me, “I want to go upstairs and burn everything that is above. That’s all I want.”

“I want a man for me, if anything. A man who could spend all of his time with my body, licking and sucking. One who really gets me hot. One without legs so he couldn’t climb the stairs.”

**What Bluebeard Said**

I have a key, says Bluebeard; it is a key that gets warm and wet when it is in your hand. This key goes in but it doesn’t turn; nonetheless, it is a tool that can leave you open for me, making you simultaneously bedroom and door. This key is not exclusively yours but it knows how to fit into you and connect your body with my body, making you a room on fire. On my knees, thrust in the arch between your legs or over you, trying to wall you up in my arms, we make this love of ours a temple where I sacrifice you daily, or you kill me in your love with tiny teeth. I have told you that for this desire, I would level kingdoms and cut little women’s throats, but you don’t let me prove it to you. Quiet and silent, you are a beautiful room in which to pass the afternoons; who could be comfortable in a bedroom that talks and scolds? If you ramble, you cannot hear the heartbeat of passionate men. The beat in my chest is
no mere trill, it is a war drum like yours. Men fear laughter and noise. If you hush yourself, you can hear how I love you delicately, in order to not disturb the world while my hands enclose you, full of love. The treasure is you and I am only the lock.

The Turning Point

Five arrived this afternoon. She is in Three’s womb. She will be a daughter of shadows who will play with spider webs, licking the dust off the shelves, if we do not decide to leave quickly.

The Outcome

The dawn that we went upstairs, there was so much silence in the house that you could hear even the gnawing of the tiny bugs biting into the wood. When I turned the lock I realized that it had no key; how long had it been since he had locked it? Perhaps we could have before, but we had no idea of where to go afterward. Though our plans were not defined, the true motive was found in Three’s womb. What happens to the children who grow up in cellars like seeds without light? Do they die and become the ghosts of haunted houses? Do they grow up, learning to make holes in the walls? Do they feel dizzy, faced with the immensity of the world? Will they not sleep until they destroy all of the places that are locked?

I always wonder about so many things, when life becomes nothing more than a succession of simple and logical events that have nothing to do with imagination.

One after another: I, opening the way with a lantern we had fixed, then Three, and after her Four. We go up the stairs, tripping over each other to breathe the sweet,
clean air of a house where sweet things are cooked and through whose windows you can see the light of dawn.

We stop in something that seems to be a small room. The children upstairs have left scattered toys and a half-assembled puzzle on the floor. We traverse this field mined with colors and explore the lower part of the house, which is nothing more than a much larger cellar with photographs on the walls telling the story of One and her master: she poses with a billowy white dress, pregnant, embracing her children, reclining among flowers, smiling. Three wants to destroy them. I tell her that we can’t waste time and that we are better off looking for the exit.

After groping about, coming across furniture and corners that are identical to one another, we find it. It was a tall door, solid and black like a mouth. We ran up to it in disorder; as silently as three overexcited women can be, we turned the doorknob. It was locked.

“We should go upstairs for the keys,” I announce in a whisper. Three looks at me with terror and refuses; Four shakes her head. The two embrace each other closely. “I have done this for you,” I say to Three, looking at her watery eyes, “for your child, who should be free of latches and cellars.”

“Liar,” she replies, “You have always come here to take little things and you have been able to leave whenever you wanted! You don’t really want to leave, Two; what you want is to be One.”

I turn my back on her while the first floor of the house brightens, letting the contours of things be seen with more definition. I leave the lantern on the floor and go upstairs with caution, in my bare feet. The staircase creaks and squeaks scandalously.
Lots of steps, lots of coming and going. On my way up, I contemplate more photographs that line the handrail like a neurotic documentation of the happiness of One: more pictures of her children, of other people that accompany her and smile at her, spaces and places large and unknown, places without shadow, without mildew, without containers piled up in the corners.

At the top of the staircase, a revelation that chills my blood: standing at the foot of the landing, with an enormous bag across her chest and her hair disheveled, is the silhouette of One, looking at me with surprised eyes. I walk toward her with arms extended like someone approaching a dream that they expect to dissipate into the air, but One does not step back. We touch each other and the world continues to spin.

“I knew that you existed, that I hadn’t dreamed you,” she says with a tremulous voice, taking me by the shoulders. “It wasn’t my imagination that I had seen, some mornings, a pale woman walking around the first floor of the house.”

“It could be that who you saw wasn’t me,” I say to her, “there must be more women that we don’t know, behind the door, in the drawers, inside the wardrobes…”

“When I heard noises, I knew it was you and that you would come for me so that we could leave for the world outside together.”

“Don’t you have a key?” I ask her.

“No,” she explained to me. “He has all of the keys on his belt: the keys to the cellar, to the doors and the drawers, he has all of them; and now he sleeps with all of them under his body. There is no way to take them because he always carries them with great care.”
“We should go,” I tell her. “There must be some way out of here. And we’ll find it; come with us.”

One assents and smiles, encircling me with her brown arms. I suppose that in that bag she’s also carrying shoes and pretty dresses because she will never let go of who she is: a woman designed to fetch and carry, to not open her mouth too much, to smile instead of stating her opinion. But I also know that one cannot be a woman in only one way. I am responsible for her, though not without knowing that a part of me will detest her for the rest of her life if we become friends.

When we get to the living room and Three and Four see One with her luggage, an uncontrollable clamor is unleashed. “Why have you brought her and not the keys?” Three reproaches me through her tears. “Haven’t we all thought about killing her, about burning everything, about not leaving a single stone still standing?”

“Kill her?” I say, “What do we know of death? The only things we’ve seen dead have been crickets and rats. Death is the word that we say the most but in reality, it’s the only thing we don’t want to come up against. And right now, to leave here we need the help of every woman in the house, the ones behind the curtains, hidden in buckets, behind the coats and umbrellas, the women in boxes who never dare to come out for fear of disgusting him.”

And at the sound of this call, women of all shapes and forms, tiny women, bent in various places, come out of their corners where they have stayed forgotten and start to fill the house, recognizing each other, embracing each other, welcoming each other while they feel in the cracks, the weaknesses, the chinks, making the wood and brick open and yield.
Three and Four are still holding each other in the midst of this miracle, incredulous and disconsolate, hurt that they are not the sole prisoners, as they believed, and little by little they are swallowed up by this boisterous group that is looking for an exit. Until the house trembles with a jolt that shakes its foundations.

“It’s him, he’s woken up!” announces One tremulously and embraces me from behind. Her contact no longer causes me the agreeable sensation from before; she is no longer the sun-toasted woman: now she is cold and slippery, a leaf trembling before the wind. I push her away.

With every step of his seven-league boots, with every wheeze of fury, with every one of the weapons with which he threatens to cut us, return us to our places, the women run and go to hide themselves wherever they can; they squeeze in together to make themselves invisible again. All but I, who remain standing in the middle of the house while he draws near, making the earth tremble. One, Three and Four have moved by fits and starts to hide themselves again in the cellar and only the house remains, inoffensive, nondescript, calm, like everything else that is starting to be colored by the first rays of the sun.

To me, the world above seems, at that moment, exquisite, a picture frame or postcard that smelled neither of garbage nor of rot.

“I want to leave,” I said to him, strong and clear, when he, still sleepy and unsteady, stood in front of me. “I could flee, I could hide, I could escape, but I need it to be you that liberates me with the same hands that have kept me here and given me pleasure. I will not go back and descend to where I was ever again, but neither will I feel envy for what I do not have. There are no more cellars to contain me.”
“All the noise and the shouting were for this? Crazy woman! Go, then,” he said to me, “Be gone and may you burn up, may you turn to dust, may you be unmade…” He went to the door, furious, and with one of the hundreds of keys at his belt he undid the lock. “As if a man could only be one way and with only one woman! As if he didn’t already have too many to take care of! Be gone and start to have respect for real life, poor silly little girl, poor little useless child…”

His last gesture, however, was caring: while I stepped through the door, his slap to my back was mixed with a caress. I thought then of Three’s son, who would grow up as a nostalgic child of shadows; but it was too late. The brightness of the day was already blinding me and I had begun to walk. And so it was…

**Domestic Disaster**

I changed my name to One and we shall say that I have learned things since then, that I have wandered between garbage and glory, and that I have found a man with no beard. A man of milk and water that laughed hoarsely and touched me with clean hands. A man who, under a certain light, reminded me of the one who had kept me hidden; and so the possibility of rewriting life again attracted me, with this new man. Like a creature of habit, I once again desired children and a home, and I asked for them when his desire for me was mature. With the man that I found, I made myself one breath and I shared my everything while we moved to the same rhythm, walking under the light of the sun, made anew. Without shadows.

And the inevitable day arrived when I noticed, in the same way I would sometimes notice the approach of rain, the loss of the first object. It happened while I
was looking at something else—while I selected the color of the walls, while I planned dinner, while I fed the man with my body.

Someone had taken some trifle from my nightstand, something insignificant, a button, a half-empty bottle of perfume. So, without thinking too much of it, I went downstairs, barefoot as I was. With a hammer and nails, I boarded up the door of the basement, while the man hid his nervous hands. But I asked him no questions and pretended I didn’t hear the sobs and the sharp whispers through the boarded-up door.

“I might be One now, but while there are men, there will be cellars,” I said to myself, hoping to have delayed, at least for a time, the arrival of domestic disaster.
Gabriela Alemán

Gabriela Alemán (1968) was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The daughter of the Ecuadorian ambassador, she traveled frequently during her childhood until her family settled in Quito, Ecuador. She has studied in Paraguay, Spain, and the United States, receiving her Master’s in Latin American Literature from the Universidad Andina de Quito and her PhD in Latin American Cinema from the University of Tulane in New Orleans. She is a licensed translator and a professor at the Universidad de San Francisco de Quito in addition to her writing career. Alemán has published six novels and several collections of short stories, and various works of hers have been translated into Croatian, Chinese, Hebrew, English and French. She received a Guggenheim in Film, Video and Radio Studies in 2006 and was selected to be included in the anthology Bogotá 39.

Her story “Labios rojos” originally appeared in the anthology La muerte silba un blues, published in 2014 as an homage to the works of film director Jess Franco.
Everyone thinks they’re paparazzi in the long run. Something happens, anything, and they’re already there, phone in hand. It was because of one of them that I met Mark. He had been fired that morning—he was a kitchen helper in the Superdome cafeteria and a tray of truffles had fallen to the floor. Thinking that no one had seen, he picked them up and put them back on the plate, before their cost could be taken out of his salary. The floor was clean, the truffles intact, no harm done—or so he thought. But Gretchen, the cleaning lady, had seen him, and she had a phone and had never forgotten that Mark had once stolen her boyfriend—or so she thought. The guy she liked was gay and Mark was gay; she didn’t need anything else to draw her conclusion. Mark never knew anything about it until that morning, when she told him just after the kitchen boss had fired him using the video as proof. Really, none of this had anything to do with me, but I ended up finding out about it when Mark rang my doorbell that night. He was holding a thick electrical cord in his hand and, after introducing himself and telling me he was my neighbor and he had lived in house on the corner with his mother since he was born, he asked if he could plug his extension cord into an outlet in my house. He told me he had tried to fix a connection and had blown a fuse and that his mother was ninety years old and he had been fired that morning. Before he could continue, I offered him my plug; he dragged the extension cord across the street and, after a minute, a few lights went on. Not half an hour later, he came back with a bottle of bourbon. When I invited him to sit on the porch he told me the story of Gretchen and the truffles. I told him I was very sorry and brought out
olives and cheese from the fridge. We only stopped talking when the bottle ran out.

Mark didn’t have to get up early to go to work the next day but I did, besides having to go to the nursing home, eat dinner with Pete and meet up with Carlos. When I asked him to leave, I made a mental note to thank him the next time I saw him; for one night, I hadn’t thought about my mother, or about my boyfriend, or about my lover. I shouldn’t have made the mental note. After four such nights, I didn’t know how to get rid of him. At that time, Pete had already been waiting for a year to move in with him. We had been together for six years when he first asked me. He said that he liked me and I liked him and that way we could start saving money and we could get married more quickly. He said this at the end of a long conversation, like he was putting a cherry on top. But he forgot I hated sugar coatings. We had never talked about getting married and certainly not to save money. When he said it, I started to sweat and a slightly nauseating smell enveloped me. I asked him to leave. He said I looked pale; he didn’t say smelly. How could I respond? I said I was tired, it had been a long day and the visit to my mother had made me come up with a new move in the strange game she and I played. At least he knew enough to hear the word mother and run away. What did I do? Took a bath, got dressed up, and went out. I did it with the stupid intention of finding someone in the first bar I saw and pissing on the life Pete wanted to build with me. As if it weren’t enough that my mother had told me that day about her first time with my father—not their first date, but the first time they had slept together, with an incredible amount of detail. I’m not too sure what I did after that because after six large drinks, I was walking along the sidewalks of the city colliding with everything that crossed my path. I was more like a drunk St. Bernard than
someone in search of a bit of action. I passed out somewhere on Frenchman Street and, when I opened my eyes, a wiener dog was licking my face with his tiny snake tongue. Someone put their arm around me and helped me stand up. The guy didn’t even come up to my shoulder. He smiled. I heard him say something about his house, how close it was and that I could sleep off my hangover there. I tried to speak, but my tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth and I couldn’t even form a complete word. I stopped trying; honestly, I didn’t have anything to say. We arrived at his house and he undressed me while his dog licked my toes. He didn’t do it sexually (the man, not the dog). If you looked around his house, you could see that it was extremely organized. His reasoning was simply that you don’t sleep in your, that you can’t rest that way. And he was right. But the tiny moist tongue of his dog had woken me up enough to kiss him. If the stupid dog hadn’t been there, I would have slept, guilt would have made me overthink everything, and the next day I would have told Pete yes. If only I’d been so lucky. I fucked Carlos, the neat freak, for the rest of the night, but before that I cleaned myself up while he looked for condoms. The next day, before I could grab my things and escape, Carlos cooked me breakfast and told me it was Saturday, so I didn’t have to leave. I didn’t tell him about my boyfriend, or about my mother with Alzheimer’s who was waiting for me in a nursing home on the outskirts of the city, or about my second job as a packer in a sweet potato factory to pay for the nursing home on the outskirts of the city. But I called work and told them I had come down with a virus. I sneezed a lot while I talked. To calm me down, I put my hand on Carlos’ package and we went back to fucking. We didn’t stop until noon. We fucked with such abandon that we were able to forget the world—or at least, I did. Maybe something
called happiness does exist. And so I found a lover who made me promise that I wouldn’t talk to him about the other parts of my life. I started to talk nonsense in the little time that I saved for myself because I couldn’t keep myself on track; I had never been able to follow a straight line. I started to use mascara to outline my enormous almond-shaped eyes just to please my lover and, as I cried uncontrollably at the slightest provocation (because I wrote my orders wrong and they didn’t understand them in the kitchen, because Pete kept calling me, because I didn’t have enough money and maybe my boyfriend’s proposition wasn’t that ridiculous), there were days that I looked like a waitress in drag. New Orleans is a great place if you don’t want to attract too much attention but, at some point, I caught my supervisor’s eye. I stopped wearing mascara and started using eyeshadow instead, and with that I managed to get him to leave me alone. Pete, however, didn’t understand my new interest in makeup, but he wasn’t a detail-oriented person; nor did he ask why I never stayed the night at his house. Carlos, on the other hand, was obsessed with details, but I didn’t matter to him enough. Or, who knows? I never asked him. We didn’t speak, and when we looked at each other, it was only to figure out how much the other person was worth. I would pay top dollar for him in a secondhand store.

When Mark arrived at my door, this had all been going on for the better part of a year. I waited anxiously for something to happen and everything to come apart at the seams. And yet, at the same time, I thought nothing was all that bad. I managed to go out every morning, do what I needed to do, and sleep alone after fucking Pete and, sometimes the same night, Carlos as well. When for some reason I felt like a porcelain vase that wouldn’t survive the night, I took a pill, unplugged my phone and slept a
restless sleep. This was the option that started to take over. Pete insisted on finalizing a date to start moving in together; my mother, obsessively, kept telling me about that first night with my father, while Carlos continued to demand nothing and fuck better every night. I started to be suspicious of Carlos. I said as much to Mark, who kept buying romance magazines and watching celebrity gossip channels; I thought he would be a good listener, that it would be a relief to tell him what was on my mind, but the only thing that interested him was how Carlos and I fucked. I tried to distract him, I asked him to give me some perspective, I told him I needed someone to tell me to check myself, that I should make plans. And then I looked at him. I really was going crazy. The person I was asking for advice had just spent four days telling me about his adventures in a chatroom with a man who he met the morning of the same day he got fired. Mark was talking about going to North Carolina to meet him. I asked him if this man had invited him and he responded that the man had expressly told him not to come. So I told him what I did with Carlos with all kinds of details. I told him and as I watched him sip his bourbon, I realized that what I was telling him was the exact same description, step by step, of what my mother had told me of her first night with my father. Instead of stopping and acknowledging that I was a sick person, I continued. It was a relief. The exorcism of replacing the ghost of my parents with my body and Carlos’ filled me with peace and I went out to look for my lover. I didn’t go looking for punishment, I went in search of release. We did exactly what I had described to Mark, but those slow, precise movements, which I controlled, did not excite him. For the first time since we met, Carlos looked at me appraisingly but with no intention to make me his. What did he know about me? In his sex-hazed eyes, I was
just another smudge. He had no idea who I was. I had to smile. I had no idea either but I didn’t tell him we were on equal footing. I hadn’t drunk that night and I didn’t feel very daring, and, perhaps because I hadn’t drunk that night, I noticed how our parody of perfection deflated. We stopped what we were doing, Carlos took out a bottle and we clinked glasses and made a toast. Something like, “to us.” And then he dressed me in the same way he had undressed me before. The dog was nowhere to be seen, the damned thing. When I finished putting on my shoes, he took my hand, pulled me off the mattress, and walked me to the door; he was barefoot and uncombed, like he had just rolled out of bed. I felt nothing, as if this were neither the beginning nor the end of anything. And when he closed the gate, still by my side, a man and a woman at three in the morning at the door of a house (how must that look?), Pete passed by in his car and saw me. He saw me and kept driving. The image of his upside-down-triangle face stayed floating in my head, that wide forehead that I had so often caressed. When Pete stopped the car half a block away, Carlos had already gone back inside. I, on the other hand, hadn’t moved. If I had had the energy, I would have jumped out of my skin, but I had no energy, I only felt anxiety and panic, an awful panic that took my breath away. I fell down, Pete ran to my side and called 911. I started to turn purple, like an a person with allergies who had smeared honey on her arms and had been crucified right in the public square while the bees just kept on coming. I opened my eyes in a hospital bed. Pete was sitting beside me holding my hand. I wanted to shout, to run away, to insult him. To ask him if he was an idiot. Everything stewing in my stomach flew out viciously when I woke up and opened my mouth. I didn’t know how it was going to come out but I didn’t plan on doing anything until it began to fester. Instead I
said something ridiculous and worried Pete unnecessarily, who thought that maybe I had had a stroke. The only thing that kept me from continuing with the farce was my lack of medical insurance. When I heard they wanted to do tests, I asked for some forms and signed myself out under my own recognizance. The immediate result was that I left the hospital and he followed me, holding my hand when I got up from the wheelchair. When I saw that he was driving toward his house, I asked him to drop me off at my place instead. He wasn’t going to argue with me; the sun was coming up. He had to get to work. When he left me in front of my door, he kissed me on the mouth. I was as dry as a strip of Velcro. He left without looking back. I took a shower, left for work and in the afternoon, I went to visit my mother. I couldn’t explain why I needed to see her, but I did. She welcomed me without the usual memory games; she was worried about me, she acted like she was well and didn’t understand what she was doing in this room she shared with four other women, nor why I looked so awful. She took my hand and walked with me the gardens. I accepted this role reversal with gratitude and, walking with her, left my bad mood behind. After she brushed my hair, I went home and slept like I hadn’t slept in years. Mark rang but I didn’t open the door, no one called me on the phone. I decided to reorganize my life and started by cutting my hair. When I returned to my mother, without bitterness, I realized that we had gone back to square one. She didn’t know who I was but, even so, decided to entrust me with her memories. She repeated her story about her night with my father but this time she was reliving it, not just remembering it. She had never told it like that. If we were advancing on our game board, or at least we had set it up again, this new take had made me lose a turn. I couldn’t listen to her talk about it without
thinking about Pete or Carlos. I kissed her on the forehead and left. When I got home, I mixed up a jar of pisco sour and made myself sick with it before Mark showed up. He wanted my opinion. He had asked for a loan from his mother and the next day he was leaving on a Greyhound bus to find George. I asked who George was. He took a crumpled piece of paper out of his back pocket and handed it to me: it was a picture of the most handsome man I had ever seen in my life. Mark was skinny, with a bald spot the size of a Frisbee on the crown of his head and liver spots on his hands. George was the lover Mark had discovered on the Internet, now that he had time to surf the web since he was out of work and hadn’t bothered looking for another job. Did he tell you to come? I asked him again, as if something had changed since the last time I asked. He shook his head. Did he give you his address? No, he responded. I pointed to the photo. Are you sure this is him? Mark shook his head again, but added that this was the photo that he had sent. I handed him a glass and served him a pisco sour. When he was on his fourth glass, I told Mark I thought it was good that he was going to look for George. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Right then the only thing I wanted to do was drag myself to bed. I don’t know who locked the front door.

Pete never called again, Carlos never called again. I didn’t call anyone. My mother still didn’t recognize me. I did nothing but work and go home and drink every night before falling exhausted into bed. The nights were long. I had stopped wearing eyeshadow and since I cut my hair I barely even had to run my hands through it to style it. My supervisor said nothing but every time we crossed paths I noticed him watching me, as if he wanted to say something, but the right moment hadn’t arrived. One night, Mark returned and knocked at the door. He looked awful, as if a cow had
licked his head and its saliva had stayed there, fermenting. I sat him down and went to get a pitcher of water. He didn’t seem to need anything else. I said nothing and he said nothing. He seemed empty, and he drank and I drank with him. When I brought over a second pitcher, he told me his story while a puddle of tears formed under his puppy-dog eyes. He cried, he wailed, he despaired while I listened to his speech—slightly melodramatic, but above all, predictable. He wasn’t expecting me to say “I told you so,” because I had never told him this would end badly. I only thought it. The man who inspired Mark’s fantasies was married. He lived in a comfortable neighborhood in North Carolina, he had life insurance and a car the size of a swimming pool, and he was thirty years older than the photo, though Mark began by telling me he wasn’t the man in the photo at all. When he saw Mark arrive, when he saw Mark coming toward him to kiss him, he grabbed his phone and called the police. He accused Mark of intending to rob him, said he was delirious and trespassing on private property. Mark told me that what hurt the most was that when he saw George’s wife, she didn’t even look scandalized. She just had a resigned look on her face that went back and forth between again and when will this end. And then Mark told me he felt used and I stood up and kissed him. That was the kind of thing I needed to hear. If I had been Mark, the only thing I would have thought was that he would never be anything more than that guy, who spent his whole life wishing he had a different face, a better income, a luxurious mane of hair. Wishing he was twenty years younger.
Sonia Manzano

Sonia Manzano Vela (1947) was born in Guayaquil, Ecuador. A writer and poet, she has received various awards for her work, including the first prize for the Concurso de Cuento Feminista Ecuatoriano (Ecuadorian Feminist Short Story Competition) in 1989 and the Joaquín Gallegos Lara award for her short story collection *Flujo escarlata* in 1999. She has published ten books of poetry, three novels, and one book of short stories, and has been featured in various anthologies of short stories and poetry. Manzano received her PhD in Education with a specialization in literature from the University of Guayaquil. She has been a teacher and a professional pianist in addition to her literary career, and currently works for the Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana in Guayaquil.

Her story “Leda” originally appeared alongside other feminist short stories based on classic myths or fairy tales in the collection *Flujo escarlata* in 1999.
Leda
Sonia Manzano

Leda would have loved to wring, with her aged woman’s fingers, the black
swan neck of her husband, the Esmeraldeño Jupiter Salcedo, but she contained herself
every time the irrepressible urge to do so arose, because the pity she felt for him was
greater than the resentment he inspired.

Jupiter Salcedo, sexagenarian, with an athletic build and a fat checkbook, had
managed, for almost three decades, a prosperous pharmacy—stuffed these days with
fluorescent lights, legal drugs, talcum powders, deodorants, disposable diapers,
prophylactics, sanitary napkins, perfumes, and all those furnishings common to a high-
class drugstore—which had belonged to his family since the era in the Esmeraldas
province in which a wild struggle exploded between the “faded” or washed-out blacks
and the blacks who were definitely black.

In the midst of all the uproar, when the dead and the wounded were the order
of the day, Jupiter’s maternal grandfather, a Jamaican with the last name of a Scotch
whiskey and an enviable knowledge of herbal medicine, installed, on a corner of the
main street of the city—the same one where the cathedral, the registrar, and the city
hall sat—a tent under which he dedicated himself for years to prescribing to his
numerous clientele exotic and almost miraculous medicines whose formulas were
known only to him. The tent, with the passage of time, began to acquire the character
of a full-blown pharmacy, for which the herbalist had to move his business from
beneath its canvas roof to, though still on the same corner, a property of reinforced
cement and sliding doors that by the middle of the 20th century already stretched for a quarter of a block.

Leda, who did not have a swan’s neck but rather the elegant legs of a mulatto stork, had met the pharmacist thirty years ago, just when she had just turned eighteen and had begun to listen, with the proper attention, to the lyrics of the boleros of Javier Solis.

She began her friendship with Jupiter almost unwillingly (until then she hadn’t been interested in exchanging more than a few words with the man who, month after month, sold her what were, in those times, indiscreet boxes of sanitary napkins) on an early morning in which the last offspring of her mother (come into the world just a few days ago) was writhing in pain due to an overcharged gassy colic. Faced with the incessant crying, the mother asked her daughter (the eldest of four children) to cross the street to buy a packet of star anise from the pharmacy that was fortunately still open, which Leda did with a friend with whom she had been studying for the Anatomy exam that she would take in school the next day.

Jupiter, who in those days had nowhere near the bad character that he would have many years later, didn’t just sell her various packets of star anise at a suspiciously low price, but also put in the hands of his neighbor, whose elegant legs he had admired at his pleasure over the counter of his pharmacy, a flask of a purple-red liquid which, according to him (and according to what his grandfather had taught him), had the ability to get rid of any kind of colic, even the most unbearable.

Starting that early morning, Leda was captivated by the conversation of the swan, and thus from then on, she looked for any pretext to get close to him. So she
Coleman 68

gone to the pharmacy in search of polish remover for her long nails, or to buy anti-
cramping pills with which she intended to rid herself of the painful spasms that
attacked her stomach in those familiar scarlet days, or to buy pills that would pull her
out of the creeping lethargy that seized her in exam time when she opened one of her
schoolbooks to study abominable materials that she detested but which she still had to
memorize in order to pass her last year of high school.

Also, with whatever pretext, her mother sent her to the Salcedo pharmacy to
buy anything, for she by no means disliked the idea that her eldest daughter could
catch the eye—and the wallet—of the dark-skinned man with a jazz trumpeter’s
mouth who, among his many attributes, was an only child, meaning that someday,
perhaps not too far off, he would become the sole owner of the pharmacy.

After two years of courting, when they were long past mere hand kisses and
had moved on to prolonged finger kisses, they married with the complacent consent of
their respective families, for not only did they make an aesthetically attractive pair
(black swan with washed-out mulatto) but also, when comparing their corresponding
family fortunes, it became obvious that between the two they showed a visible
monetary equality.

For a considerable time, things went quite normally in the marriage (though
Leda always felt that the floor under her feet was of an ambiguous consistency, as if
her home had been built over a space without a definite depth). Only a few months
after signing papers in the registrar’s office, Helena was born, and a year after that,
Theobalدو arrived.
While the children were small, there were never serious problems, nor when the children were bigger did things present irreparable cracks. The conflict began to take shape when Leda and Jupiter saw clear signs that they were getting old. Then, after a quarter of a century together, (but still together) Leda began to make daily assessments of her existential checkbook and kept finding, unsettlingly, that her life was unbalanced. Jupiter, on the other hand, began to do honor to his name: he became an authoritarian divinity and his personality, which had never been that of a docile dove, soured to such an extent that Leda and her children opted to only have direct contact with him when it was strictly necessary.

At the smallest problems, thundering Jupiter exploded like a volcano full of pus; at the blandest pretexts, Jupiter Salcedo would spew curses at the face of whatever poor soul had provoked him. He turned from a difficult man into an impossible one (impossible to put up with). However, he had not become a completely bitter man; his aggressiveness was not a permanent condition. It disappeared as if by magic once he let off some steam through some kind of outlet or once his beastly condition mellowed when something or someone attracted his total attention (which would happen when he oversaw the sales in his open pharmacy or when, in the evenings, he played at forty with twenty-year-old women).

He was, then, an intermittent neurotic, but he was far from a “bad” person, and the certainty that Leda had always had of the latter was what brought her up short in the moment when she wanted to turn on her engines and take flight, a one-way trip, that would put infinite distance between his neurosis and her increasingly more
exhausted patience (like she was also brought up short by the fact that Jupiter had always proved himself to be an otherwise loving father).

During the hours that the pharmacist remained at his business—only for the sake of policing what his employees sold, since for a long time he had not been in charge of dispensing pills of any kind—Leda breathed more easily, thanking heaven for the eight hours of peace she was so graciously granted. It was a lapse from which she took as much benefit as possible, for as soon as Jupiter went downstairs, she wrapped a tight scarlet turban around her head and put on a silk robe that clung to her body (still prone to experiencing earthy tremblings of medium intensity). Immediately, after giving some kind of instruction to the maid (who also wanted to breathe freely) she launched herself into the street with such unworried freshness that one would say she was possessed by the total conviction that she didn’t need to be held accountable to anyone for her actions, not even her children who had already left the house a while ago—though not a long while—each with their respective and loving better half.

On the corner opposite the pharmacy, Leda waited for one of the shuttles that went from one end of the malecón, the boardwalk by the river, to the other, and only got on the one that pulled up with slow serenity to the stop.

When the shuttle arrived at the neighborhood where Helena lived—her daughter had moved not very far away to live in a common-law union with a petrochemical engineer—Leda got off with the same lack of urgency with which she had embarked and headed for a pedestrian zone so she could walk about three blocks (which was the distance between the boardwalk and Helena’s house). She talked with her daughter for a while about everything and nothing, and when even the topic of
“nothing” had been exhausted, she bid Helena goodbye with the typical warmth of a broody hen and walked back along the three blocks that separated her from the sea. Back on the malecón she caught another shuttle, this time to head south, a little farther than the municipal slaughterhouse in whose surroundings—permeated with the faint smell of cows and street hot dogs—lived her son Theobaldo, a young painter already fairly popular in the provincial artistic medium, who usually used a taut horsetail when he planted himself for hours and hours in front of an easel with the exclusive purpose of painting, with fine paint brushes of camel hair, innumerable portraits of tiny black angels that burst forth from the face of the mulatto model who posed for him, with stoic patience, during the whole day (it seemed that she was handsomely rewarded during the night when the painter had to pose nude for her, standing on one foot, in long sessions of a love more eccentric than pleasurable).

Regarding her children, Leda didn’t worry much: the two both lived as they had chosen to live and both, at least for the moment, were loved. But regarding herself, Leda had more than enough reasons to be worried. She had entered the twilight of the gods feeling like she had stopped being loved (if, in reality, she had ever truly been loved before).

In the past four years, her husband had distanced himself from her with giant steps, to such point that he wouldn’t even rip out a yawn at the woman for whose single kiss he had once ripped the hairs from his chest. Wanting to find some kind of justification for such coldness, Leda thought that what had happened to her could be the same thing that happens to many married women whose shine has tarnished (in
parts where it is unpardonable to tarnish), who one morning wake up with the agonizing sensation that their husbands have replaced them with younger women.

Leda wanted to know who Jupiter’s lover was, and what she was like, and so she contracted the services of a private detective who was recommended by a friend—also autumnal and deceived—who, thanks to the investigator’s nose, excellent for sniffing out adultery, had been able to discover her hedonistic consort indulging himself in the purple sheets of a second-rate motel.

The detective—an ex-police agent who spoke little and charged a lot—after listening to Leda’s suspicions about the questionable fidelity of her spouse, asked her to provide first-hand information so he could begin to follow the trail of the presumed cheater. That is to say, to tell him where Jupiter went after closing the pharmacy and what he did on the weekends and the rest of the time that he was out of the house, to which Leda responded that if she had possessed all of this information, she would not have needed to employ the detective. However, she provided the bloodhound with a fairly significant fact when she informed him that on various occasions, she had seen Jupiter heading southeast, more specifically in the direction of the neighborhood that was the residence of families that had for generations been dedicated to the work of making fishing nets.

The same week that Leda had contacted the detective, he called her to ask her to come to his office—a poky little elevator-like room with no windows—because the case that she had given him had been “almost completely solved.”

In front of the detective, for a moment she was assaulted by the doubt of whether she really wanted to know the reason her husband had rejected her as a
woman, but she finally decided to know the unvarnished truth; a revelation that arrived in the form of a set of photos, four in total, in each of which Jupiter appeared, embracing, in four distinct scenes and in four different ways, a real slut.

Leda looked briefly at the photographs, and without saying much—something the detective appreciated, since he was fonder of actions than words—took out of her wallet a wad of large bills whose amount seemed to satisfy the man who, after feeling the weight of it, tucked it into some part of his clothing with a slight smile.

Back in her home, Leda felt, for the first time in a long time in absolute possession of the truth, and this possession gave her such strength of mind that she wanted in those moments to confront her husband and brandish, right in front of his face, the handful of photos for which she had paid so dearly.

When the swan barged into the bedroom—which, despite everything, they still shared—Leda, without descending from her position as the mute diva in a talking movie, looked him up and down and, keeping her eyes on his shoes, extended to him the four photos that she had previously taken from the sleeve of her silk robe.

But instead of brandishing them furiously in front of his jazz trumpeter’s nose, as had been her original intention, she waved the photos lightly and slowly in front of his eyes before proceeding to tear them to bits with the fingers of a grievously offended woman. But Jupiter was not perturbed in the slightest by this incident with the photographs, for, during the course of his married life he had learned—among a myriad of things—that his wife, when she was really outraged, might get to the point of assuming the air of an offended stork, but from there nothing came of it (the wind
never became a gale, much less a tornado that threatened to destroy everything the two had constructed up until that moment).

Deciding to make Leda understand that his hormonal needs as an oversexed sixty-year-old man could not, for any reason, be squandered in the calm swan lake that she had ultimately become, Jupiter thought that the moment had come to speak clearly, to propose a bipartite treaty so that neither of the two would end up losing something at the cause of a situation that, with good handling (handling in the utilitarian sense) didn’t have to result in disagreeable consequences (such as damaging the image of a stable and reconciled marriage that both had contributed to configuring over the years based on appearances, craftiness and social convention). This was a consideration about which Jupiter, after Leda’s waters had returned to their habitual course, asked her what she planned to do now that she had noticed “certain things.” And before she could give him any kind of response to that inquiry, he went back to intervening, saying categorically that “in regards to himself, he did not plan to change a single thing, since up until then he had known how to carry things so well,” as they say “so well,” that, despite having had a relationship with the woman in the photo for some time, he had taken care—and he made it very clear to her—that his conduct did not awaken the slightest suspicion. He felt empowered to challenge her to say it to his face if there was some night he had not come home, or if he had at any point had the audacity to present himself to her with his trumpeter’s mouth all swollen up from the kisses and bites that usually accompany any adulterous relationship that sins indiscreetly.
Leda, who hated melodramas—the expensive ones as much as the cheap ones—and had always considered wasting useless efforts on always-lost causes to be in the worst possible taste, felt that what her husband said was very reasonable. She also felt—though with an intense pain in her middle—that it was already too late to start to reproach him, confronted with Jupiter’s cynical face; it was the worst thing that she felt after having discovered that he had expelled her from their existential context (without an eviction notice, in an untimely manner, only because his excited hormones had decreed it so).

The next day, the pharmacist had barely left the house on the way to his work when Leda dressed herself in an anxious hurry, as if from that moment her race against time had become a matter of life or death (which ran at full speed close behind her, nipping at her heels). Like a sigh, she flew down the stairs, like a sigh she crossed the street until she came to the bus stop. There she waited just a few moments until, like a sigh, a nervous shuttle parked briefly in front of her, transportation that she clambered into and from which she did not get off even when passing Helena’s neighborhood, nor when arriving at Theobaldo’s. This time she decided to go to the end of the line, to see for herself if it was true what her autumnal and betrayed friend had told her with respect to the carnal attractions offered by the small spa that had recently been opened—with picnic areas, dressing rooms, life jackets and the rest of the necessary accessories—by the Very Distinguished Municipality of the city in a deep hollow in which (always, according to what her friend had said) there was an abundance of men, small boats and sterile palm trees (that is to say, those without coconuts).
She walked about three blocks—why did she always have to walk three blocks to get anywhere?—until her sandals partially sunk in the wet sand. There she discovered an abandoned canoe lying upside down, and decided to hoist herself onto it for a long while (time she needed to sew up her open wound).

She stayed there for three hours, her gaze fixed on the ocean—why did she always have to meditate for three hours before feeling that strangulation had again stopped choking her?—an interval in which various flocks of green seagulls passed over her and various people passed by her—not many, since it was a weekday—who she didn’t really notice, engrossed as she was in observing the far-off distance of the ocean. At length, she did notice three young men who had buzzed by several times, giving her glances that were evasive at first, but gradually transformed into palpably insolent.

Leda, who knew how to properly return an exchange of glances, also ended up looking insolently at the youngsters in whom she had awakened such interest: they were olive-skinned swans; they were strong swans; they were young swans, crude, elastic and lustrous; they were swans whose naked torsos were all invitation for someone to adorn them with bridles of silver-plated saliva, braided by the easily-overheated imagination of certain mature women.

Jupiter continued to sleep on his half of the bed—the other half was occupied by unhappy resentment—continued to eat from his own plate and continued to complete his physiological necessities in the same toilet bowl. Nothing changed for the black-necked swan after Leda found out about his dark fickleness: he continued
opening and closing his pharmacy and continued going out, as if nothing had happened, in the last death rattles of every dawn.

Every Wednesday and Friday I go unfailingly to that little beach. Every Wednesday and Friday I stop being the unconditional one, the one who only knows how to understand and forgive, the number one accomplice to her husband, in order to become the Leda who desperately searches to be loved before time turns her into half-burnt fuel for the flames. Every Wednesday and Friday I come here. I climb onto the abandoned canoe and from there fix my transparent eyes on the horizon with the hypnotic fixedness of those who wish their love to be returned (my eyes still full of desires and still highly desirable).

I am not the one to guess what the near future will hold for me. What I can predict is that, at some moment, I will not be able to resist the calls that come from one of the young men standing at some point close to the sea: the one waving a part of red swim trunks in his hand, as if to signal to me that he is naked, as if to invite me to fool around with him—signs that also reveal to me that it is a real waste to keep sitting on this canoe when waiting for me in the waves is a part of life on which I have not yet ridden.
Aminta Buenaño

Aminta Buenaño Rugel (1958) was born in Santa Lucía in the Guayas province of Ecuador. She is a university professor, a journalist and the current Ecuadorian ambassador to Nicaragua; she has served as the Ecuadorian congressional vice president and former ambassador to Spain and helped to write the 2008 Constitution of Ecuador. Buenaño studied Communications at the Universidad de Guayaquil and taught Secondary Education with a specialization in Spanish Language and Literature at the Universidad Católica de Santiago de Guayaquil. She has published various collections of short stories and is well-known as an author and journalist both in Ecuador and throughout Latin America. Her stories have been translated into Italian, English and French and have featured in Ecuadorian and foreign anthologies. She has won various awards for her writing in Ecuador and Spain.

Her story “La mujer que extravió su cuerpo” was originally published in the collection Mujeres divinas, a celebration of the Ecuadorian woman, in 2006.
The Woman Who Mislaid Her Body
Aminta Buenaño

What a pity
What a shame
That woman there who has never known love
A life that was no life
A bird passing by without coming to earth
Without plunging her feet into the fiery waters...

Rosa Amelia Alvarado

She was a sixty-year-old woman who got up one day from the vast loneliness of her king-sized bed, intrigued by a bad dream, and when she sat up to put on the soft slippers that protected her arthritic feet from the cutting morning winds, the extreme violence of an intimate truth revealed by the dream stopped her in her tracks and broke her routine. She realized, abruptly, that she had never known what love was in her whole life. Pardon, it wasn’t love. She wanted to say it but didn’t dare: orgasm. Or perhaps not love, or pleasure, or anything that resembled it; she wasn’t sure. The truth that she had never wanted to admit, that she had stubbornly refused to contemplate in the depths of her own heart—she felt it plainly in that moment, unpredicted by her routine, and it made her stop and look unseeingly out the window, making an inventory of everything that she could have been and wasn’t. She realized that some things had been her dreams and others reality, like when you bump into a dark wall at night and suddenly chip a tooth.

In the distance, in the creamy blue of the newborn day, seagulls danced ballet steps, while the clouds, like her memories, crowded together, furiously fleeing from the darkness to thirstily drink the light that bled from the emerging sun.
Her name was María and she had been taught faith and good manners. Before she knew how to talk, she learned the push and pull of relations with the opposite sex. From her father, she learned the civil code and obedience to the laws. From her mother, she learned all of the social conventions and prohibitions: the philosophy of the half-smile, of the sphinx, of the crossed legs, of appearances and when no meant yes. And she thought, in the last instance, that perhaps obedience meant happiness.

She decided in silence to not let herself be controlled by her feelings, nor by her instincts, nor by her emotions. No, they would not dominate her like they did her mother. She would not let the invisible cord of affection tie her to the foot of the table; she would not succumb to love, nor would she be so weak as to allow herself to bear children, nor would she be so silly as to let herself be convinced by sugar-coated words, nor would she be weak, or fragile, or submissive. No, she was tired of everything that was a hemorrhage. Hemorrhages of tears, hemorrhages of blood, hemorrhages of emotions. The women of her family knew only red eyes, tissues and prayers. The women of her family spoke of pains, doubts and betrayals like one would speak of daily sustenance. No, she would be reason, expedience, not sentiment; she would plan her life strategically so that it would be like she wanted: a complete triumph over life and not the chaos of absurd feelings and emotions by which the females of her family had lost themselves. She thought about it for a long time in an instinctive manner, but, as usually happens with adolescent determinations, she forgot about it when she began to grow up. But she had not completely forgotten; like a woodworm slowly eating away at the wood, these ideas had subtly infiltrated her most inner self in a remote place of her conscience where the blows of reason nor the
bewilderment of the senses could reach. It was these ideas that dictated strange behaviors, painful sensations, shameful obsessions, signs like splinters that made people brand her as weird, capricious, a little crazy.

When she fell in love for the first time, her anemic heart warned that it was only when the immature youth, full of amorous spasms, confessed it to her ear and she confused the warm tickle on her ear with love. It was always peaceful to know that she was loved; she felt safe. It was always good to know that someone agonized over her, trembled with pure love, ready to give even his life for a kiss, an embrace, or the hope of something more. Then she could loosen up a little, tug at things, adjust her screws and finally feel like she had something of that control that escaped her like sand between her fingers. She could pull the nets of love from afar, not letting herself be trapped, for then, like a dying fish, she could perish.

After the revelation of this love came José, then Pedro, then Elías, all of them studied like an entomologist observes his treasure through a magnifying glass. But the one to whom she finally gave the “yes” of matrimony was the safety of the Arab merchant with intense black eyes and camel’s eyelashes, who had a favorable income and a thriving business, who devotedly administered his fabric store with the same exacting concentration with which he listened to her. When he saw her for the first time, his eyes became magic carpets on which she flew with the grace of the vizier of oriental stories. The nights with him, after a brief and traditional honeymoon, were mortally tedious.

The man dutifully obliged himself every day to religiously fulfill his conjugal duties with the same faithfulness he gave his prayers, and she would look at the
ceiling, read the newspaper, watch television while he strove like a man possessed, looking to draw out a moan, a brief if small cry of pleasure from that soft and delicate body extended before him like a piece of silk with an invisible tag that said do your duty, but don’t bother me. Later, the merchant turned selfish; he no longer expected anything. He did not beg her to howl like a cat in heat, to cry though it would be a lie, to make those little tantalizing noises that drove him crazy; he didn’t even take off his shirt. He embraced her, urged by flaming lust; he took what was his and then turned around to snore like a log as if she were a lavish feast after which he took a nap. The situation was so disagreeable that she started to come up with reasons to come to bed late—the bunch of dishes that waited in the kitchen until midnight, the straggling accounts of the store, the endless cleaning of an already-clean house.

Her life with the merchant became a thing of the past when she found him with the thin and tired little store clerk, riding astride the hairy body of her stallion of a husband in the chilly darkness of the storeroom where the fabrics were stored. She left that corner of her life as one leaves a church after confessing all of one’s sins, in virtuous peace, with lots of money in her pocket and the desperate pleas of her contrite husband who claimed to love her even more than ever. She was also well aware of the exhausted gaze of the tenacious lawyer who helped her with the lawsuit and who fell head over heels in love with her because, between so many troubles and groans, he noticed the abundant beauty of her white breasts that rose and fell to the rhythm of her copious tears and the childlike tenderness of her regal pout. Behind the black veil of his eyelashes, he listened patiently to all the pains of love and the tortures of her life, while he decided to make her happy, though she never was.
Without even knowing why, faced with such devotion and such love, she remained brusque, indifferent, disloyal, as if the fact of attracting so much love to herself was just the confirmation of the insignificance of the unfortunate lawyer. And one day, he fell ill with depression and ended up wandering into an insane asylum where she visited him every Sunday with the faithfulness of an old relative relieved not to have to carry the burden of the illness of a respected but oppressive family member. And his love, if that is what it was, was full of little details, from preparing his tea and putting it in a comforting thermos, to bringing him the cigarettes that were forbidden by the doctor, to cleaning his abandoned office until it shone like polished metal, to reading him the newspaper. She would tell him news that she invented to brighten his time in that hospital of lunatics where everyone had delirious obsessions that stirred up the environment until it was unbearable. The only obsession he had was this woman who was close but inaccessible, from whom he could never eke out a moan of love, a tremor from her body, a gaze charged with passion, an I love you though it might be fleeting. Something that would sew together the threads of the love he had kept in the unsatisfied well of his heart since the first time he saw her enter his office, buxom and arrogant. He was a successful professional who hadn’t lost a case in twenty years, had one all of the scholarships in college, and had triumphed with his oratory arts in the best forums of the city, and who had, nonetheless, been incapable of igniting the desire of the only woman, among the hundreds that had offered themselves to him, that he had really loved.

The preoccupation of a rejected man had become an obsession, then a chronic depression and finally a madness that obliged her to stop visiting him because every
time he saw her, he cornered her, wanting to make love to her against the wall, on top of the breakfast table, on the ratty sofa in the living room in front of the expectant and alarmed gazes of the rest of the patients. She stopped visiting him, though she prayed for him every day, and before he died, she visited him for the last time, only to produce in him, without wanting to, without knowing, a last outburst of desperate jealousy when she praised the dark locks of the young male nurse who took care of him and another thin and haggard man. And she left, thinking not about the lawyer who she had left alone, sick and even sadder than ever, but rather about the strange glimmer in the ambiguous eyes of that male nurse with an angel’s body, and about the provocative gaze of the other male nurse who had not stopped looking at her since she sat her mature body in the chair.

Until that moment, despite her silky, wide-hipped body attaining an enviable maturity, she had passed through the sentimental life like a swan through water, without wetting her heart. But once, in those moments in which she used to look out the window, feeling safe and almost happy to see herself rescued from the misgivings of her youth, to see her life passing by flat and linear, without anything to shake the threads of her certainty, getting up in the mornings to water her dozens of plants and feed the canaries, preparing her vegetarian breakfast and turning on the television to view the rosary of telenovelas that kept her life alit with the light switch of others’ dramas, she saw that someone had slid a letter under her door. She managed to see a shadow that fled as if a dog were snapping at its heels. She went over to the door and extracted from the envelope an exquisite linen paper, on which, written in luxurious handwriting, with nineteenth-century calligraphy, someone said:
I know you, I have known you for a long time and since I first saw you, you have made my heart beat like I had seen the apparition of a Vestal before me. I know that you will say that I exaggerate but I think of you and I speak to you every night; there is not a moment of my life that I do not think of you. You have shared my most riotous dreams, the craziest imaginations, and I know that if you knew the extent of my love, you would love me as well. But I fear you; my love for you is such that I am terrified that you will only tell me no and reject me.

One who never abandons you for a minute of your existence.

Shadow

This letter, instead of leaving her dreamy and heightening her curiosity, only her double the locks on her door and begin to suspect even the man that delivered the daily newspaper. Her interest was not in the quantity of love that the man promised; rather, it was centered in the fear of the unknown. So she continuously alerted her neighborhood guard about strange people, warned her next-door neighbor who would usually converse with her in the afternoons, and reminded her own heart to be alert to the eventuality of an assault. When she had already forgotten the letter and tended to think about it as one remembers a brother, a beloved friend, her two husbands or the many lost boyfriends of her youth, another mysterious letter arrived that said:

I have seen you; I have seen you and I have watched you with passion, with frenzy; you have not noticed, but your body has the passionate vices of a lustful animal, of a whale in heat. I look at you, I drink you, I bite your image. I want to have you next to me and caress you so that your moans of pleasure are heard all the way to
the cathedral. I want to be a snake so I can wind myself around your waist, a vampire to drink your blood, the sun to kiss your lips. I am crazy with love for you. I kiss you, even the last hair of your mysterious cavern. Yours.

Shadow

This last letter made her almost crazy because she did not remember going anywhere in the last month, except for the few times she had gone out to church and to the neighborhood store. It worried her that this man seemed to know her so well and she feared that he was a thug, a rapist, a delinquent of the types that dedicated themselves to pursuing and killing single women. She quickly decided to move and rent bedrooms to young women who studied at the university. When she moved, everything went back to normal. For a few months, those strange letters stopped coming; her life passed between the television, her embroidery and interminable conversations with the young girls that livened up her afternoons, confiding in her so she would answer with advice borrowed from the heroines of the telenovelas and with her own affirmations that even she didn’t believe much, not because they weren’t true but rather because she had never put them into practice.

She didn’t miss anything, she didn’t feel anything, and she felt all right. She did not remember the pain, the mysteries of anxiety, or even the dreams, and in some way she felt she was safe; she did not know from what, but she was safe. She hardly saw her family and fled from them because she preferred to be a part of the faraway dramas of television than to live through the interminable ones of her family. It was easier, lighter.
One evening, when she was enjoying herself talking to her birds, one of her tenants gave her a common envelope. She thought it was a bill and put it in her pocket. When she went to the bathroom, it fell out of her pocket and she recognized the handwriting. She opened it with apprehension and with a paralyzing fear: the stranger was near! The letter said,

_I cannot forget you_; you are always with me. I have never known a woman more voluptuous, more sensual. Your buttocks look like mature apples; they make me want to bite them. Even more, one of them belongs to me. When you bathe, your nipples darken and have the hardness of a diamond. Your hair is so long that I could wrap myself in it like a shroud. I dream that it is my shroud. I still love you, I wait for you, I dream of you.

_Shadow_

She couldn’t bear it anymore and she pestered the girl with questions, only to get from her a frightened: _I don’t know, it was behind the door_ and a glance that made her doubt her mental stability. But the man knew her intimately. Maybe he watched her while she bathed? But that was impossible; there was no window, nor the smallest crack in the bedroom where he could look at her. Could he be a crazy man, a misfit, someone who wanted to play a bad joke on her? She calmed herself and waited attentively for a few days for the unknown one to appear. It was impossible for it to be one of her two husbands, one dead by accident and the other by depression. Her boyfriends? But she couldn’t even remember one of their names, they should all be married. Who could it be? But behind the door there was only silence. The days
passed by, monotonous and uninteresting, but the correspondence became regular and every month the wax-sealed letter turned up, the nineteenth-century letter with perfect handwriting and a whiff of lavender. In each one, the man expressed his animal desires to make her his, but with tender and loving words.

The terror she felt at the beginning began to fade with time, until she even permitted herself, once in a while, to reread some phrases to estimate the extent of human imbecility—to die of desire? How crazy! But in her dreams, everything that the man promised became reality, and she awoke, agitated, feeling her muscles burn and her heart pounding beneath her nipples that were standing at attention as if facing a battle. The unknown author began to specialize; in each letter he spoke of some aspect of her body. One was about her belly button. The next month about her curving hips, then her hard nipples. Then her neck that he would consume with kisses after licking it with his tongue. Then her earlobes that he would suck like they were tiny udders. Later about the smoothness of her inner thigh, the delicacy of her ankles, her fingers, the corners of her lips. He did not forget her back, which after a long and sensual massage he would bathe in wine to calm the thirst of his love. He started to drive her crazy; this man made her burn with an incomprehensible and unfamiliar fire and she did not know how to put out such torment. Her body was a jail that was sometimes impossible to inhabit. The strange, unusual sensations riveted her in a painful daydream that she did not know how to deal with.

One day, she decided not to open a single one of those insolent wax-sealed letters. And they were piling up in her study like bills after they had been paid. Sometimes, she walked by them and resisted the impulses of her body to open them.
My peace is priceless, she repeated insistently. She felt like a little girl who had not
passed first grade and was forced to read aloud. These sensations, these unknown
sensations, hammered away at her chaste existence. Until suddenly, like the cessation
of a torrential downpour, the letters stopped.

And her life leveled out until that night, that brutal dream in which the
unknown had arrived. She had been able to feel his strong and manly breath
overwhelming her face in a caress that stirred her senses, his hands clawing at her
clothing as if she were a fallen bird, and his mouth capturing hers until he entered her
with a violent and erect tongue that drove into the roof of her mouth. She had felt her
body throb furiously and search for his body with violent and tender energy and open
itself and pin itself to him with the hunger of a savage castaway, and she had felt
herself, frenzied, respond to him with a strange sensation, with an incomprehensible
ardor, with the savage longing of tortured love. And when she was at the point of
rising up like a mountain erupting, the twisted, funereal guffaws of her husbands held
her back and put her in her place with irony, with resentment, with sarcasm: Your time
has passed… And the unconquerable terror, the fear of herself, settled back in again,
and she opened her eyes to an interminable light, to a reality in which she was herself
and no other.

And she woke and woke again with a bad taste in her mouth, her heartbeat
pounding in her ears, and the pure desire that, once and for all, damned though it was,
the shadow would materialize, that her dream would become reality before it was too
late. And the certainty of the truth that had been revealed, of the terrible fear that she
had carried all her life, made her stare out the window, unseeing, rejecting the bright
day, the flying gulls, the silent peace of her house, asking herself for the first time with intimate anguish if it was not too late to become familiar with the unknown, if it was not too late to begin again….
Luz Argentina Chiriboga

Luz Argentina Chiriboga (1940) was born in the Esmeraldas province of Ecuador, a northern coastal area with a largely Afro-Ecuadorian population. She is one of the few well-known black female authors in Ecuador, and is perhaps one of the only black female authors to become well-known through writing about her own people. She studied Biological Sciences with a specialization in Ecology at the University of Quito, and has been a writer all her life, though she only began publishing after her marriage. Chiriboga has published seven books—some novels, some poetry, some nonfiction—and her short stories have been featured in several anthologies; her novel *Bajo la piel de los tambores* has been translated into English as *Drums Under My Skin*. Her writing is largely concerned with the lives and voices of black Ecuadorian women.

Her story “El castillo” was originally published in the collection *Este mundo no es de las feas* in 2006.
The Mansion
Luz Argentina Chiriboga

Even hurrying, it had not been easy for Candelaria to get to the place, but there she was. The early hours of the morning were the best, providing the perfect opportunity to get to know the location. Upon arriving, she swung down from her horse, tied him to a tree and went up to the front door of the mansion. Candelaria was a black woman of thirty-two, tall and robust, who as a child had had another name, her true one, the name her parents gave her. The sun shone between the laurels, the oaks, the chestnuts; trills and jubilations flowed from the celebrating birds. The wind assaulted her face, making her feel again the same tension that she had repressed during her infancy, when her parents worked on the hacienda.

She went in search of the owner of the land that was for sale; her desire was to acquire a few hectares to dedicate herself to farming. Candelaria, who had lived through that long-ago era of grand passions, tried to overcome her uneasiness. She had been awake since dawn, with her heart oppressed by the uncertainty of her business. She mounted Pío, her horse, and went in search of the lord of the mansion. Unlike in previous days, when she had wandered her house in floral skirts and short-sleeved blouses, now she donned brown riding breeches, a long-sleeved shirt, and leather boots, which she wore only because they were new. They were part of the fortune she had inherited from her mistress and so, though they fit her quite tightly, she put them on to impress the man selling the land, the mansion’s owner. In the future, she promised herself, she’d never wear them again, though she didn’t know when she’d be able to take them off.
Before setting out on her journey, she lit three green candles for Yemayá, the goddess of the rivers, of the seas and the rains, to secure good land that would be enough for her to sow her seeds and let them flower. Candelaria was already happy because she was convinced that She would grant her what she longed for.

Candelaria knocked on the door of the antique-style mansion, waited a long time and, when she thought that no one was at home, an old man leaned out, his blue eyes, upon seeing her, furrowing in a frown.

The mansion was enormous, cheerless and dark; it looked like an old convent, with damp walls. The old white man, thin, with a cigar in his mouth, observed her without saying a word. He wasn’t sure how to treat a black woman interested in buying his mansion. A cage with a blue-colored bird hung in a window. Calendaria smiled slightly, trying to conceal her obvious fear of the owner’s reaction. She approached, unsettled, with quick steps, greeting him with a nod and he returned the gesture. Indecisive, Candelaria inquired after his health and told him how beautiful the scenery was. She saw that the old man was beginning to pale, but she continued speaking and, since the door was open, she went in. And if, in the first moment, she intended to excuse herself, after a few seconds, she thought it would be better to continue. She surprised herself by proceeding with such assertiveness. She didn’t like acting this way, it wasn’t what she really wanted, but these were the manners that the white people used. The man wanted to say something, something like: black people don’t come to my house, but his intention stayed strangled in his throat. A dense and heavy silence fell. Candelaria continued to be fascinated and looked around. He could not imagine that this woman would have the audacity to buy his land and his mansion.
His emotions were mixed due to the contradictory feelings that Candelaria had provoked in him. Shortly, a tic appeared at the corner of his mouth.

She waited a bit for the old man to calm himself, already starting to feel frustrated. She waited for him to ask her about the purpose of her visit, but it was like she didn’t exist. The woman had the disagreeable impression that the old man would not sell her the land or the mansion. It made her uncomfortable that he had not asked her to pass through to the living room; the way he was looking at her with haughtiness and contempt was infuriating her.

Worried that she would not be able to buy the land, she sat. The furniture had loose springs. There was only one open window that barely permitted the entry of the sun’s rays. In this menthol-smelling shadow, they started talking. The old man’s voice was nasal and he choked when he breathed, and once in a while he took a drag off his cigar. When he confirmed that she was interested in buying his land, he frowned and did not conceal his surprise. The man’s hands trembled; he was an old man who seemed to be high in the hierarchy, of a strange character, with an arrogant gaze.

Candelaria waited hopelessly for his response, with a lump of tears in her throat—Yemayá would not deny her this miracle.

When she was convinced that the proprietor would not negotiate, though he observed her with curiosity, she watched him put his head between his hands. How could it be possible that this was happening to him; how would he sell his mansion and his land to a black woman? No, this couldn’t be happening to him. He would have been able to sell it at half of the asking price, or as a last resort, leave it to a white man, but it was the only thing that he had. This didn’t make any sense; no, he couldn’t
sell her his mansion, even though it was in ruins, maintaining its lineage from other eras. A sea of doubts sent waves crashing against him; a growing anguish squeezed his heart. Suddenly, he had a coughing fit, and she lifted his arm to help him stand, made him walk to the window; then, with a fan that she saw on the table, she gave him air. He looked at her rather sadly, barely able to speak, and told her that his son Ernesto was not at home.

When she prepared to leave the place, he gestured at her to sit down. She accepted, but as the son was delayed in arriving, he told her to come back another day, though her worry was that another interested party would arrive and close the deal.

She had anticipated returning as soon as possible, to avoid the darkness of the night. She asked his permission to look over the mansion, and her first impression was of a gloomy building. In the midst of the thick shadows, a path opened up, and she arrived at a more inviting hallway where various portraits were hanging, illuminated by the violent light that the sun projected. The face of a young man with curly hair and a Roman profile shone in all its splendor. Candelaria stopped to look at it – he was not handsome, but he had a definite personality. He wore a cloth jacket and she supposed that his mother must have been happy to have such a son.

They did not go back to talking about selling the land, but she felt the landowner examining her sidelong; she thought about saying something, but stopped, convinced that it would be better for the old man to initiate the conversation. He would think, perhaps, that this woman couldn’t pay the value of the hacienda; no doubt he did not want to make deals with women. He looked at her like a strange insect; surely he was taking in the features of the young woman’s personality. She
raised her head, looked at herself in a mirror that adorned the waiting room. She faced the image of a black woman with lively eyes, full lips, a large mouth, a clear forehead, snub-nosed—her smooth cheeks stood out, she stood up straight, and her white teeth could be seen when she smiled. The old man did not have another alternative but to speak.

He started by apologizing that she had found him in house clothes, for he had not been expecting a visit and especially not early in the morning. Candelaria understood that she had made an error in arriving at that hour; she expressed her apologies to him, but she was afraid of returning alone, and asked him not to worry about his clothes.

The old man was driving away her fear and her annoyance, and she raised her eyes to look at him; he did not seem as enraged as he did at first. He breathed in deeply and, supporting himself on the seat, went to change position; when he couldn’t, he started to shake. She guessed that he was gravely ill; she saw that he was very pale, that he felt ridiculous about his ailments. Calendaria went in search of the kitchen, turning around a few times before she found it. Everything was in disarray; she looked for matches, made a fire in a gas cooker and rapidly prepared a cup of coffee. When the table was set with the cold meats she had brought, she helped the old man sit down; he was surprised by what was served, so much that he left the plates almost empty. Upon finishing, he felt overwhelmed and emotionlessly, he thanked her.

She went to let Pío loose to graze and then went back to leaving the kitchen in order. Though now he treated her with friendliness, the old man eyed her
disrespectfully, reaffirming to himself that he would not sell her his mansion or his lands.

Candelaria continued to wait for Ernesto and chatted politely with the homeowner, though she did not possess the intellectual level of the gentleman, considering she had been a housemaid and her mistress, Doña Rosario, had only taught her the essentials. When her mistress fell ill it was she that answered the correspondence. It was the time in which the lady sought out Pablo to teach me to play the guitar, and that was how we fell in love, with him holding his arm over one of my breasts. He was twenty-five and I was twenty. Pablo, a strong black man, seemed like a sea animal; his body was always damp. When I saw him for the first time, it seemed impossible for me to conceive of such a beautiful young man.

If I buy this mansion, I will go look for him, I thought. We hadn’t just learned to play the guitar but also to smile at life. It was precisely remembering those images that made her sigh.

The old man’s eyes shied away from hers, but upon hearing her sighs, their gazes met and, due to his discomfiture, the old man smiled slightly. Candelaria went back to observing him—he seemed tired and he exclaimed, trying to stand up, that he wanted to go to the other room. She put him on her arm and he latched onto her until he sat on the sofa.

“Ah, old age!” she heard him complain, but she went to give Pío some grass. The place was paradise. The trees projected their shade in endless dialogue with the wind. The completely clear sky invited one to stroll. Slowly, she was getting to know the marvel of forests that the property possessed. She prayed to Yemayá with a
trembling voice; she was nervous from waiting for the old man’s son. She jumped onto Pío so that, as if he already knew the hacienda well, he could carry her to a river of crystalline waters. Lying back in the grass, she waited for the horse to quench his thirst.

When she returned to the mansion, the old man was sleeping with the expression of a baby. His pale and gaunt face inspired sympathy. She went in search of a blanket to cover his legs. Candelaria felt remorse for leaving him alone, for he coughed frequently and she feared that he would have another coughing fit, that he could need her help. Upon hearing him snore, she walked around the mansion and climbed a marble spiral staircase that snaked up five floors and looked like a serpent. Candelaria arrived panting and breathless but took the initiative to enter one of the fifteen bedrooms the mansion possessed. The walls, papered with French tapestries, shone with a yellowish luster, and in a corner, a glass cabinet guarded tiny porcelain figures while a recliner sat to one side. On a mahogany cabinet lay a guitar. She took it with her. In that afternoon that she wandered about the mansion, the room maintained its old latent elegance. It was a large room, with glass lamps hanging from the wall. The walls were decorated with rock crystal mirrors that made it shine beautifully.

She went down to where the old man was resting and started to sing various songs. She was far from a guitar virtuoso, but she wanted to bring peace to the owner of the mansion. Her voice jumped from one melody to another, the songs familiar to the old man, who awoke with his eyes full of tears. He believed he was living in a dream and that his son Ernesto, the owner of the guitar, had returned. Candelaria apologized, but did not know the cause of his sobbing. He looked at her with searching
eyes. In reality, the man lived alone, and for more than a year he had been in complete solitude and he was dying in the mansion like it was the bottom of an aquarium. The mansion with its cold stairs had become a shadowy fortress. The owner said that his son Ernesto had gone out dressed in a gray suit, a raincoat and a scarf twisted around his neck; he was tall and thin and he knew how to play the guitar. The old man could not continue, for his weeping was drowning his words. He still could not believe his only son was dead.

The man had been nervous the entire day, and now anguish had seized him; he could not calm himself. Candelaria gave him a glass of sugared water to drink to calm his nerves. When she drew near him, she detected a stench, as he had not bathed himself for some time. She carried him to the bathroom where there was a claw-footed tub and, without getting upset, she helped him to bathe. They ended up sitting in the twilight.

There she began to sing again; the place was so distant and so solitary that Calendaria supposed they could be the only inhabitants for miles. The old man needed to talk and he was sure that she would listen. He started to remember the labyrinths of his existence. He talked about a huge beach where there were many hotels exclusively for the nobility. On vacation, he went to get to know the place—it was a Sunday in April, he couldn’t remember the year anymore. He stopped a moment, put his ideas in order, and said, the most elegant hotel in the city. Rosa was on the beach, singing in a low soprano voice. I was astonished upon seeing her, as brilliant as the Sun. I sent her the first letter in which I told her she was not to blame for making me fall in love with her. Rosa answered me, “Come to me and we will waste no time.”
When he recovered from anxiety and his surprise, he gave her a diamond ring; after three months they married and had Ernesto. Rosa never lost her enthusiasm for the guitar and for song. She died and then Ernesto, the only bond that held me to life, was carried off as well.

“Your pain is my pain, sir.”

Candelaria, with an inclination of her head, bid him farewell. As she reached the gate, she breathed in the summery, chlorophyllic air. She went in search of Pío, who continued to avail himself of the greenness. Looking at the sky, she smiled. Yemayá, on this occasion, had failed her. But when she went to depart, the face of the old man appeared in the window, his eyes full of tears. He waved at her to wait. Candelaria looked at him, paralyzed, without saying a word. The old man, with trembling steps, approached her to stop her. When he had recovered his calm, he said:

“Even without money, I will give you everything, but take me with you.”
Works Cited


Works Consulted


Appendix of Original Texts
Calamidad doméstica

A Luisa Valenzuela
Uno, Dos, Tres y Cuatro

Yo soy Dos. Uno vive en la superficie —antes me era fácil escuchar su bullita mientras deambulaba por la casa cantando, haciendo sonar ollas o usando sus tacones altos. Ya no—. Tres y Cuatro, quienes están ahora en el sótano conmigo, no me dejan escucharla porque pasan todo el tiempo rumiando entre ellas planes secretos de huida y conquista del piso de arriba. Como estamos en invierno, ambas duermen en la misma cama de resorte chirriantes abrazadas: Tres, sobre el gran pecho de Cuatro o rodeándola con las piernas con una familiaridad tan inexplicable que su cariño me causa cierta repugnancia.

Ambas se han vuelto una masa amorosa que no sufre de frío a pesar de las ralas cobijas que nos ha dado Barba Azul. «Ven aquí» me dice Cuatro mientras Tres duerme babeando sus gigantescos senos. «Hay espacio para una más». Yo les doy la espalda y me doblo sobre mí misma. Me abrazo. Entre nosotras preferimos no tocarnos, pero hay noches en que quisiera desarrollar porque siento que el calor se ha ido yendo de mi cuerpo hasta que solo han quedado tendones fríos. Desde que llegaron Tres y Cuatro a vivir en este sótano, poco a poco me estoy quedando en cuero y huesos.
La vida en las cisternas

Hay mujeres que no se ven, mujeres en los aljibes, mujeres bajo las camas, mujeres bajo la tierra, mujeres subterfugias, mujeres en los cajones, mujeres topo que han nacido así y no tienen idea de cómo ir hacia la superficie, mujeres chapoteando en las alcantarillas, ratas que tienen caderas y sexo de mujer, mujeres enterradas que, como yo, se descomponen lentamente. Desde que tengo memoria he sido Dos y he habitado en el sótano de esta casa, que con el cambio de clima se vuelve un horno o una heladera. He vivido silenciosa en este espacio donde van a parar las cosas que no se necesitan, los objetos sucios y rotos. He estado aquí desde siempre escuchando traqueteos de tablas sobre mi cabeza, aspirando polvo, carcoma y el olor verde tristón de la humedad; pero permanezco porque estoy cerca del hombre que amo, el varón que tiene el sexo duro y la barba cerrada muy azul. Cuando puede, él se escapa del nudo de brazos con que Uno lo tiene sujeto en la superficie y baja discretamente a verme. No, la palabra correcta es a vernos, a las tres, pero yo sé que si viene es por mí, y que las otras dos me fueron traídas desde afuera únicamente para hacerme compañía mientras él no me pudiera dar sus ojos.
Descripción del amo

En vísperas, yo anticipaba su voz, que había aprendido a aislar del resto del ruido de la casa; su respiración densa que se iba aproximando desde los escalones que separan este mundo del de arriba. Contaba las pisadas hasta verlo aparecer, siempre espléndido con un regalo nuevo, con alguna cosa que poner en las infinitas estanterías donde se habían ido acumulando pernos, naftalina, caramelos, monedas, migajas que nadie echaría de menos de donde él venía. «¿Cómo está mi comadreja nocturna?», pregunta juguetonamente el hombre que amaba, y yo corría a sus brazos feliz, y él cerraba sus manos sobre mi cintura ciñéndola lo necesario para que el apretujón fuera delicioso. De eso se ha tratado siempre el querer a alguien, lo aprendí. De poner tu cuello entre sus dedos y esperar que asfixie para desfallecer sobre su pecho. De poner un cuchillo entre sus manos y esperar que no te corte. De eso se trata el amor.

Cambio de estación

Cuando llueve casi no duermo, reposo con los ojos abiertos mientras Cuatro y Tres se entregan a sus murmullos y luego a una respiración pesada que se transforma en...
ronquido y en canto de ballenas. Cuatro a veces habla dormida y se pregunta cómo será el mundo de arriba; lo imagina por los sonidos y los cambios de temperatura, cree que está lleno de flores, no como las flores de plástico que nos trae Barba Azul. Las imagina gigantescas, habitables, comestibles. Yo hablo poco de mis excursiones secretas al mundo de arriba, lo que sé es que antes había una mujer feliz y niños y árboles y un perro. Ahora no tengo idea, hace mucho que no la escucho cantar debajo del ruido.

A veces, cuando Tres no puede dormir, me pide que le muestre los objetos que he tomado cuando asciendo a tientas, porque nuestro sótano es muy oscuro. Despliego sobre el suelo de tierra una tela afelpada donde he empacado algunas cosas sueltas que robé de arriba. Pasan por nuestras manos unos anteojos de sol, monedas, un pendiente, un cuchillo, un cortaúñas, una media, un chocolate. «Uno lloró mucho porque creyó que ha perdido este pendiente dorado», digo enseñándolo. Nosotros sabemos que en realidad nadie pierde nada, los objetos solamente se desplazan de dueño y más de una vez es probable que hayan sido tomados por las mujeres que habitan en los sótanos.

Tres suelta como siempre una risa sobreexcitada e histérica y Cuatro intenta calmarla. Tres quiere subir, matar a los niños, envenenar al perro, prenderle fuego y la casa y luego irse llena de paz.
«No sabes nada», le dice Cuatro. «Dos va a guiarnos», contesta, «Dos va a dirigir la toma del mundo de arriba».

Tres cree que cuando Barba Azul ya no tenga nada, cuando hayamos arrasado con todo, entonces no le quedará más remedio que quedarse con nosotras.

Cuando eso pase, deberá bajar para siempre al sótano o hacernos subir.

«Los hombres no viven en los sótanos», le digo a Tres, los hombres hicieron los sótanos». «¿Iremos entonces?», pregunta Tres retorciendo nerviosa sus manos heladas de niña.

Yo permanezco con la boca cerrada.

**Condición de la habitante**

Existe una multiplicación de sótanos infinitos donde las mujeres subterráneas damos las unas con las otras: mujeres alteradas, mujeres vivísimas, niñas, mujeres que se han extraviado y han ido a parar a ellos jugando, sótanos que comunican con armarios y cloacas y con tumbas donde las mujeres que han sido enterradas en vida solo tienen su voz para comunicarse, cantar y dar alaridos. Esos ruidos sordos que se escuchan en la noche son las mujeres de los sótanos ascendiendo, cometiendo pequeños hurtos, tesoros de otro
tiempo que les recuerdan su condición de carroñeras nocturnas.

En realidad yo solo soy una teórica del mundo, un ser lamentable y erudito que lo dejaría todo al primer toque cariñoso del hombre que la monta, y por él echaría a correr como una lagartija sobre la tierra.

Las mujeres del sótano tenemos problemas con nuestra temperatura, estamos frías, somos muy blancas, poseemos el instinto de los topos y el pelo muy negro. En todo hogar respetable suele haber una mujer arriba y dos o tres mujeres en el sótano para los malos tiempos. Así son los hombres de frágiles.

**Sueños**

Tengo sueños con Uno, pesadillas dolorosas. No hay nada que mi inconsciente haya decidido esconder: todo es evidente y está alejado del lenguaje hermético de los sueños. En uno de los sueños, Uno y yo debemos viajar en un automóvil pequeño, así que vamos juntas en la parte de atrás. Por alguna razón vamos estrechas, así que siento el cuerpo de Uno junto al mío, incomodándome. Uno y yo arrimamos nuestras piernas, el muslo de ella está tostado por el sol y tiene vellos minúsculos y dorados como los de
un cachorro, el mío es de un tono amarillo cremoso, como el color de los huesos.

Somos muy diferentes, eso es lo obvio del sueño. Para evitar verlo, estiro mi vestido oscuro hacia abajo pero no cede. Uno y yo no podemos evitar ver nuestra piel haciendo contrapunto. También observo sus manos, son bonitas y de uñas cristalinas. En los dedos tienen anillos dorados. Uno de ellos es una argolla.

En otro sueño me oculto entre la ropa del clóset de Uno: ropa colorida, llena de flores y calabazas; es la ropa de una mujer que sale, que enseña los hombros y que disfruta recibiendo sol. Siento rabia hacia Uno, rabia porque puede salir y usar los tacones altos, rabia porque no sabe que su felicidad se ha realizado sobre los cuerpos de tres mujeres que viven en un sótano. Furia porque concluyo que alguien que se ríe todo el tiempo no puede ser más que idiota. Así que salgo del clóset y robo lo que me parece más bonito, cinco o seis vestidos, lo que puedo cargar rápidamente. Bajo las escaleras y abro la puerta de un día luminoso. Corro.

Como no sé bien cómo luce el mundo exterior, todo en el sueño es verde y lleno de filamentos y hierbas que crecen desde el piso. Corro más y corro descalza por el descampado hasta que me canso y debo tumbarme. Detrás de mis párpados todo se incendia. Dormito.
Luego se me acerca un hombre vestido rígi-
rosamente y me dice que va a detenerme por robar
la ropa de Uno; que debo regresar a la casa y pedir
disculpas ante todos por lo que hice. Entonces me
sorprende mi decisión; pienso: preferiría morir antes
que recibir esa humillación. Ya mucha vergüenza son
los sótanos, así que corro hasta un desnivel que está
a varios metros del piso y me lanzo, para recibir el
golpe asesino.

A veces, solo a veces, en el mundo de arriba, luego
de los gemidos del amor, que son tan distintos de los
jadeos dolientes de Tres y Cuatro, alguien llora. Me pa-
rece que es la voz de Uno teniendo también pesadillas;
me pregunto si soñará que hay una mujer en el sótano
que hurta sus cosas.

**Anatomía**

—¡Qué extraños son los hombres desnudos! —me
dice Tres—: tienen ese aparejo tieso y feo con el que te
hacen daño pero a la vez una requiere de ese daño. Hay
fuerza, hay lucha, pero también hay deseo de abando-
narse y perder esa guerra donde una cede, a la vez que
gana. Creo que si tuviera un arma igual a esa, en lugar
de abandonarme, yo me enfrentaría.
—No sé para qué quieres defenderte; ¿para salir, Tres? Afuera sobre todo hay hombres armados con muchos sótanos vacíos.

—Yo no quiero salir —me dice Tres—, yo quiero subir y quemar lo que hay arriba. Eso es todo lo que quiero.

—Yo quiero un hombre para mí, más bien. Un hombre con el que pueda pasar todo el tiempo de mi cuerpo lamiéndolo y succionando. Uno que me caliente definitivamente. Uno sin piernas para que no pueda subir por las escaleras.

Las palabras de Barba Azul

Tengo una llave —dice Barba Azul—; es una llave que suele calentarse y humedecerse, cuando está en tu mano. Esa llave encaja pero no gira, sin embargo es un instrumento que puede dejarte abierta para mí, siendo tú a la vez habitación y puerta. Esta llave no es exclusivamente tuya pero sabe calzarte y comunica tu cuerpo con mi cuerpo volviéndote una estancia encendida. De rodillas, hincado en el arco entre tus piernas o sobre ti, intentando amurallarte con mis brazos, hacemos de este amor nuestro un templo donde te sacrífico a diario o me asesinas en tu amor con dientes pequeñitos. Por ese deseo te he dicho que yo arrasaría comarcas y degollaría peque-
ñas mujeres, pero no me dejas demostrártelo. Quieta y silenciosa, eres una estancia bella donde pasar las tardes; ¿quién podría estar cómodo en una habitación que habla y que reprocha? Si parloteas, no puedes escuchar latir el corazón de los hombres apasionados. El que está en mi pecho no es un trino, es un tambor de guerra como el tuyo. Los hombres temen a la risa y al ruido. Si te callas, podrás escuchar cómo te quiero delicadamente, para no perturbar al mundo mientras mis manos te encierran, llenas de amor. El tesoro eres tú y yo solo soy la cerradura.

**El punto de giro**

Cinco ha llegado esta tarde. Está en el útero de tres. Será una niña de sombra que jugará con telarañas lamerá el polvo de los estantes si no nos decidimos a salir rápidamente.

**El suceso**

La madrugada en que subimos, había tanto silencio en la casa que podía escucharse hasta el roer de los pequeños bichos mordiendo la madera. Cuando giré la cerradura supe que no tenía llave; ¿hacía cuánto que él
no ponía seguro? Quizá hubiéramos podido salir de ahí antes, pero no teníamos idea de hacia dónde marchar después. Aunque los planes no estuvieran definidos, el verdadero motivo se encontraba dentro de la matriz de Tres. ¿Qué sucede con los niños que crecen en los sótanos como semillas sin sol? ¿Mueren y se vuelven los fantasmas de las casas encantadas? ¿Crecen, aprenden a hacer agujeros en las paredes? ¿Sentirán vértigo ante la inmensidad del mundo? ¿No descansarán hasta derribar todos los espacios cerrados?

Yo siempre me pregunto tantas cosas, cuando la vida se trata de un sucederse de acontecimientos simples y lógicos que nada tienen que ver con la imaginación.

Una tras otra: yo, abriendo camino con una linterna que habíamos arreglado; luego Tres, y después Cuatro, ascendemos escaleras arriba tropezándonos las unas con las otras hasta respirar el aire dulce y limpio de una casa donde se cocinan cosas dulces y por cuyas ventanas se puede ver la luz del amanecer.

Vamos a parar a algo que parece ser una sala pequeña. Los niños de arriba han dejado en el piso juguetes esparcidos y un rompecabezas a medio armar. Atravesamos ese campo minado de colores y exploramos la parte baja de la casa, que no es otra cosa que un sótano mucho más grande y con fotografías en las paredes donde se cuenta la historia de Uno y el amo: sus poses
con un vestido blanco inflado, en embarazo, abrazando a sus criaturas, tumbada entre flores, sonriendo. Tres quiere destruirlas, yo le digo que no perdamos tiempo y que más bien busquemos la salida.

Luego de tantear, atravesando muebles y esquinas idénticas las unas a las otras, la encontramos. Era un portón alto, sólido y oscuro como una boca. Corrimos hasta él agitadas, haciendo todo el silencio que pueden llegar a hacer tres mujeres sobreexcitadas giramos el pomo. Estaba cerrada.

—Debemos ir escaleras arriba por las llaves—anuncio en un susurro. Tres me mira con pavor y se niega; Cuatro niega con la cabeza. Las dos se trenzan la una con la otra apretadamente—. Yo he hecho esto por ti —le digo a Tres mirando sus ojos aguados—, por tu hijo, que debe estar libre de aladuras y de sótanos.

—Mentira—me replica—. ¡Tú siempre has venido aquí a tomar pequeñas cosas y has podido irte las veces que has querido! En realidad no quieres marcharte, Dos, tú lo que quieres es ser Uno.

Le doy la espalda mientras la planta baja de la casa permite ver con más definición los contornos de las cosas. Dejo la linterna en el piso y subo con cuidado con los pies descalzos. La escalera chirría y traqueta escandalosamente. Muchas pisadas, mucho ir y venir. En el ascenso contemplo más fotografías que bordean el pasamano como
una documentación neurótica de la felicidad de Uno: más imágenes de sus hijos, de otra gente que la acompaña y le sonríe, espacios y lugares amplios y desconocidos, sitios sin penumbra, sin moho, sin trastos arrumados en los rincones.

Al final de la escalera, una revelación que me congela la sangre. Parada al pie del rellano, con un enorme bolso en bandolera y el cabello desmelenado, está la silueta de Uno, mirándome con ojos asombrados. Avanzo hasta ella con los brazos extendidos como quien ingresa a un sueño que espera se desvanezca en el aire, pero Uno no retrocede. Nos tocamos y todo sigue sucediendo.

—Sabía que tú existías, que no te había soñado— dice con voz trémula tomándome por los hombros—. No era idea mía que había visto en las madrugadas una mujer pálida caminando por la planta baja de la casa.

—Quizá la que viste no era yo— le digo—: debe haber más mujeres que no conocemos, tras la puerta, en los cajones, metidas en el armarios...

—Cuando escuché ruidos supe que eras tú y que venías por mí para irnos juntas al mundo de afuera.

—¿No tienes tú una llave?— le pregunto.

—No— me explica—. Las llaves las tiene todas él en el cinto: las llaves de los sótanos, de las puertas y de los cajones las tiene él; y ahora duerme con todas bajo su cuerpo. No hay manera de tenerlas porque las lleva siempre con sumo cuidado.
—Debemos irnos —le digo—. Debe haber alguna manera de salir. Ya la encontraremos, ven con nosotras.

Uno asiente y sonríe, me rodea con sus brazos morenos. Supongo que en ese bolso lleva también zapatos y vestidos lindos porque nunca dejará de ser quien es: una mujer diseñada para llevar y traer, para no abrir demasiado la boca, para sonreír en lugar de opinar. Pero también sé que no se puede ser mujer de una sola manera. Le correspondo no sin saber que una parte de mí la detestará el resto de su vida si nos volvemos compañeras.

Cuando llegamos a la sala y Tres y Cuatro ven a Uno con su equipaje, se desata un vocerio incontrolable.
—¿Por qué la has traído a ella y no a las llaves? —me reprocha Tres entre lágrimas—. ¿Acaso no habíamos pensando en matarla, en quemarlo todo, en no dejar en pie a ninguna piedra?
—¿Matar? —le digo—, ¿qué sabemos nosotras de la muerte? Lo único que hemos visto muerto han sido grillos y ratas. La muerte es la palabra que más se dice pero es en realidad con lo único que no queremos toparnos. Y en este momento, para salir de aquí necesitamos la ayuda de todas las mujeres de la casa, de las que están tras las cortinas, escondidas en cubetas, tras abrigos y paraguas, las mujeres en cajas que jamás se atreven a salir por temor a disgustarlo.
Y a la voz de este llamado, mujeres de todos los tamaños y formas, mujeres menudas, dobladas en varias partes, salen de sus rincones donde han permanecido olvidadas y empiezan a llenar la casa, reconociéndose entre ellas, abrazándose, dándose la bienvenida mientras revisan hendijas, resquebrajaduras, resquicios que hagan que la madera y el ladrillo se abran y cedan.

Tres y Cuatro permanecen abrazadas en medio de este prodigio, incrédulas y desconsoladas, heridas por no ser las únicas prisioneras exclusivas, como creían, y poco a poco se van perdiendo en medio de ese grupo bullanguero que busca una salida. Hasta que la casa tiembla con una sacudida que zarandea sus cimientos.

—Es él, ha despertado —anuncia Uno trémula y me abraza por la espalda. Su contacto ya no me causa la sensación agradable de antes, ya no es la mujer tostada por el sol: ahora es fría y resbaladiza, una hoja al viento que tiembla. La aparto.

Con cada pisada de sus botas de siete leguas, con cada resoplido de furia, con cada una de las armas con que amenaza cortarnos, volvemos a nuestros sitios, las mujeres corren y van a ocultarse donde pueden, se arrejuntan y se aprietan para volverse invisibles; salvo yo, que permanezco parada en el medio de la casa mientras él se acerca, provocando remezones. Uno, Tres y Cuatro han ido a trampolines a ocultarse al sótano de vuelta y solo ha quedado
la casa, inofensiva, anodina, plácida como cualquiera que empieza a colorearse con los primeros rayos del sol.

El mundo de arriba entonces me parece primoroso, una estampa soñada que no olía ni a sobras ni a fermento. —Quiero irme —le dije fuerte y claro mientras él, aún adormilado y tambaleante, se paraba frente a mí—. Podría huir, podría ocultarme, podría escapar, pero necesito que seas tú el que me libere con las mismas manos con las que me has retenido y me has dado placer. Ya no volveré a bajar nunca más a donde estaba, pero tampoco sentiré envidia por lo que no tengo. Ya no hay sótanos que me contengan.

—¿Y por eso la bulla y los alaridos? ¡Loca! Vete entonces —me dijo—. Vete a que te calcines, a que empolves, a que te deshagas... —Fue hasta la puerta lleno de furia y con una de las cientos de llaves de su cinto corrió el seguro—. ¡Como si un hombre pudiera ser solo de una forma y con una sola mujer! ¡Como si ya no tuviera demasiadas que cuidar! Vete y empieza a tener respeto por la vida real, pobre tonta, pobre niña inútil...

Su último gesto, sin embargo, fue cariñoso: mientras atravesaba la puerta, me hizo una mezcla de caricia y golpe que depositó en mi espalda. Pensé entonces en el hijo de Tres, que crecería como un nostálgico niño de sombra; pero ya fue tarde. Ya me encogecía el resplandor del día y había empezado a caminar. Y fue...
Me cambié el nombre a Uno y digamos que he aprendido cosas desde entonces, que he deambulado entre la basura y la gloria, y también que he dado con un hombre sin barba. Un hombre de leche y de agua que reía ronco y me tocaba con manos limpias. Un hombre que bajo cierta luz me recordaba al que me tenía escondida; y entonces me atrajo la posibilidad de reescribir la vida otra vez, con este nuevo. Como una bestia de costumbres, volví a desear hijos y una casa, y se la pedí cuando su deseo por mí estaba maduro. Con el hombre que hallé me hice un solo aliento y me compartí toda mientras íbamos al mismo ritmo, marchando bajo la luz del sol, nuevos. Sin penumbras.

Y llegó el inevitable día en que yo noté, como suele una a veces notar que viene la lluvia, la pérdida del primer objeto. Sucedía mientras miraba a otra parte, mientras elegía el color de las paredes, mientras planificaba la cena, mientras alimentaba al hombre con mi cuerpo.

Alguien había tomado una tontería de mi veladora, algo insignificante, un botón, un frasquito a la mitad. Entonces, sin esperar demasiado, bajé descalza como estaba y, con martillo y clavos, tapeé la puerta del sótano, mientras el hombre ocultaba sus manos nerviosas. Pero yo no hice preguntas y fingí que no
oía los llantos ni los murmullos agudos tras la puerta tapiada.

«Puede que ahora yo sea Uno, pero mientras haya hombres habrá sótanos», me dije a mí misma, esperando haber detenido, por un tiempo al menos, el arribo de la calamidad doméstica.
LABIOS ROJOS

Todo el mundo se cree paparazi últimamente. Pasa algo, cualquier cosa, y ya tienen el celular en la mano. Fue por culpa de uno de ellos que conocí a Mark. Lo habían echado del trabajo esa mañana, era ayudante de cocina en la cafetería del Superdome y una bandeja de dulces se le había caído al piso y, pensando que nadie lo había visto, los recogió y devolvió al plato, antes de que se los descontaran del sueldo. El piso estaba limpio, las trufas intactas, nadie tenía por qué salir lastimado. O eso pensó. Solo que la señora de la limpieza lo había visto y Gretchen tenía un celular y nunca había olvidado que Mark una vez le quitó un novio. O eso creyó. El tipo que le gustaba era gay y Mark era gay, no necesitó más para sacar su conclusión. Mark nunca supo de eso hasta esa mañana, cuando ella se lo contó minutos después de que el jefe de cocina lo despidiera con la prueba del video. En realidad, nada de eso tenía algo que ver conmigo, solo que terminé sabiéndolo cuando Mark timbró a mi puerta esa noche. Cargaba un enorme cable de luz en la mano y, luego de introducirse y contarme que era mi vecino y que vivía en la casa esquinera con su madre desde que nació, me pidió que le dejara enchufar la extensión en mi casa. Me contó que había intentado arreglar una conexión y que los interruptores habían saltado.
y que su mamá tenía noventa años y que a él lo habían despedido esa mañana. Antes de que siguiera, le ofrecí mi enchufe; arrastró el cable hasta el otro lado de la calle y, después de un rato, unas pocas luces se encendieron. No pasó ni media hora cuando regresó con una botella de *bourbon*. Cuando lo invité a sentarse en el porche me contó la historia de Gretchen y las trufas. Le dije que lo sentía mucho y saqué aceitunas y queso de la heladera. Solo paramos de hablar cuando se terminó la botella. Mark no tenía que levantarse temprano para ir a trabajar al día siguiente pero yo sí, además de ir al geriátrico, cenar con Pete y encontrarme con Carlos. Cuando le pedí que se fuera, me hice una nota mental de agradecerle la próxima vez que lo viera; por una noche no había pensado ni en mi madre, ni en mi novio, ni en mi amante. No debí hacerme la nota mental. La cuarta noche seguida que apareció por mi casa ya no sabía cómo deshacerme de él. Para ese momento, Pete llevaba un año esperando que me mudara a vivir con él. Cuando me lo pidió, llevábamos seis años juntos. Me había dicho que yo le gustaba y que él me gustaba y que con eso ahorraríamos y nos podríamos casar más rápido. Lo dijo al final de una larga conversación, como si pusiera una guinda en la punta de un pastel. Solo que olvidé que yo odiaba los confites. Nunca habíamos hablado de casarnos y menos de hacerlo porque tendríamos dinero. Cuando me lo dijo comencé a transpirar y un olor levemente nauseabundo me envolvió y le pedí que se fuera. Me dijo que me notaba pálida, no dijo apestosa.

¿Qué le podía responder? Le dije que estaba cansada, que había sido un largo día y que la visita a mi madre me había
hecho improvisar una nueva movida en nuestro por demás extraño juego. Por lo menos sabía lo suficiente como para escuchar la palabra madre y salir corriendo. ¿Qué hice yo? Bañarme, perfumarme y salir. Lo hice con la estúpida intención de buscar a alguien en el primer bar que encontrara para mear encima de lo que Pete quería construir conmigo. Como si no hubiera sido suficiente que mi mamá me contara ese día sobre su primer encuentro con mi padre, no su primera cita, sino la primera vez que se acostaron con una retahíla infinita de detalles. No estaba muy segura de lo que hacía porque después de siete largos tragos caminaba por las veredas de la ciudad colisionando con todo lo que se me cruzaba. Parecía más un san bernardo borracho que alguien en busca de un poco de acción. Me desmayé en algún lugar de Frenchman Street y cuando abrí los ojos un perro salchicha me pasaba su pequeña lengua de serpiente por la cara y alguien me metía el brazo bajo el sobaco y me ayudaba a pararme. El muchacho no me llegaba ni al hombro. Sonreía. Le escuché decir algo sobre su casa, su cercanía y que ahí se me pasaría la resaca. Intenté hablar, pero la lengua se me enredó en el paladar y no pude formar una palabra completa. No insistí; en realidad, no tenía qué decirle. Llegamos a su casa y me desvistió; mientras lo hacía, su perro me lamía los dedos de los pies. No lo hizo con lascivia (él, no el perro). Si se veía alrededor de su casa, se notaba que era ordenado, en extremo. El razonamiento no era otro que uno no duerme vestido, que así no se descansa. Y tenía razón. Solo que la húmeda y minúscula lengua de su perro me había despertado lo suficiente como para
besarlo. Si el tonto perro no hubiera estado ahí, habría dormido, la culpa me habría comido el coco y al día siguiente le habría dicho a Pete que sí. No conté con esa suerte. Cogí con el pulcro Carlos lo que quedaba de la noche, pero antes de eso me hizo bañarme, mientras él buscaba condones. Al día siguiente, antes de agarrar mis cosas y escapar, Carlos me preparó el desayuno, me informó que era sábado y que no tenía por qué irme. No le hablé de mi novio, ni de mi madre con alzhéimer que me esperaba en un centro en las afueras de la ciudad, ni de mi segundo trabajo como empacadora en una fábrica de batatas para pagar ese centro en las afueras de la ciudad. Pero llamé al trabajo y dije que había agarrado un virus. Estornudé mucho mientras hablaba. Para tranquilizarme, puse la mano sobre el bulto de Carlos y volvimos a coger. No paramos hasta el mediodía. Lo hicimos con tanto afán que logramos olvidarnos del mundo, o por lo menos yo lo logré. Tal vez exista algo llamado felicidad. Así conseguí un amante, que me hizo prometerle que no hablaría con él de la otra parte de mi vida. Comencé a desvariar en el poco tiempo del que disponía para mí misma porque no logré quedarme de un solo lado de la línea; nunca había podido desarrollar un trazo firme. Comencé a usar rímel para delinear mis enormes ojos almendrados solo para agradar a mi amante y, como lloraba sin control a la menor provocación (porque escribía mal mis pedidos y en la cocina no los entendían, porque Pete llamaba sin control, porque no me alcanzaba el dinero y quizá la propuesta de mi novio no era tan descabellada), había días en los que parecía un camarero vestido de drag. Nueva Orleans es un
gran sitio para no llamar demasiado la atención, pero en algún momento mi supervisor me llamó la atención. Dejé el rímel pero empecé a usar sombras y con eso logré que el supervisor se desentendiera. Pete, sin embargo, no comprendió mi nuevo interés por el maquillaje, pero a él los detalles se le escapaban; tampoco preguntaba por qué ya nunca me quedaba a dormir en su casa. Carlos, en cambio, tenía ojo de maníaco para los detalles pero yo no le importaba lo suficiente. O, ¿quién sabe? Nunca se lo pregunté. No hablábamos, y cuando nos mirábamos solo lo hacíamos para saber cuánto valíamos. Yo estaba dispuesta a pagar una suma elevada en una tienda de segunda mano por él.

Cuando llegó Mark a mi puerta, eso había estado ocurriendo por buena parte del año. Esperaba con ansiedad que algo pasara y que todo se desmoronara. Y, a la vez, pensaba que nada iba demasiado mal. conseguía salir todas las mañanas, hacer mis vueltas y dormir solo después de coger con Pete y, a veces, en la misma noche, con Carlos. Cuando por alguna razón me sentía como un jarrón de porcelana que no iba a sobrevivir la noche, me tomaba una pastilla, desconectaba el celular y dormía un sueño tormentoso. Esa era la opción que empezaba a dominar. Pete insistía en poner una fecha para comenzar la mudanza; mi mamá, obsesivamente, me relataba una y otra vez esa primera noche con mi padre mientras Carlos seguía sin exigir nada y cada noche cogía mejor. Comencé a sospechar de Carlos. Se lo dije a Mark, que no dejaba de comprar revistas del corazón y mirar los canales que reproducían los chismes de farándula; lo imaginaba un buen consejero y pensé
que sería un alivio contarte lo que crecía en mi interior, pero lo único que le interesó fue saber cómo cogíamos con Carlos. Traté de desviar su atención, le pedí que me diera perspectiva, le dije que necesitaba que alguien me dijera que me detuviera, que debía hacer planes. Y entonces lo miré. De verdad estaba mal de la cabeza. La persona a la que le pedía consejo llevaba cuatro días contándome sobre sus aventuras en el chat con un hombre que conoció la madrugada del día en que lo despidieron. Estaba hablando de viajar a Carolina del Norte para conocerlo. Le pregunté que si él lo invité y me respondió que el hombre expresamente le pidió que no fuera. Así que le conté lo que hacíamos con Carlos con todo tipo de detalles, y mientras lo hacía y lo veía tomando a sorbos su bourbon, me di cuenta de que lo que me contaba era la descripción, paso a paso, minuciosa y en detalle, de lo que mi madre me había contado de su primera noche con mi padre. En vez de parar y reconocerme como una enferma, seguí. Fue un consuelo. El exorcismo de reemplazar mi cuerpo y el de Carlos por el fantasma del de mis padres me envolvió como una paz líquida y salí a buscar a mi amante. No fui buscando castigo, fui buscando liberación. Hicimos exactamente lo que le describí a Mark, pero esos movimientos lentos y precisos, que yo conducía, no lograron excitarlo. Por primera vez desde que nos conocíamos Carlos me miró con intención de medirme, no de comprarme. ¿Qué sabía de mí? El humo que pasó por sus ojos le respondió con un borrón. No tenía idea de quién era. Tuve que sonreír. Yo tampoco tenía idea pero no le dije que estábamos en tablas. No había bebido esa noche y no me sentía audaz y, quizá
porque no había bebido esa noche, noté cómo se desinflaba nuestra parodia de perfección. Paramos lo que estábamos haciendo, Carlos sacó una botella y chocamos copas e hicimos un brindis. Algo así como por nosotros. Y, entonces, como antes me desvestió, ahora me vestió. El perro no se veía por ningún lado, el maldito. Cuando terminó de ponerme los zapatos, me tomó de la mano, me levantó del colchón y me acompañó hasta la puerta de calle; él apenas se había tirado un salto de cama encima e iba descalzo y despeinado. No sentí nada, como si no fuera el principio o el fin de algo. Y cuando cerró la reja, cuando aún estaba a mi lado, un hombre y una mujer a las tres de la mañana en la puerta de una casa (¿cómo se debía ver eso?), pasó Pete en su carro y me miró, lo miró y siguió. Me quedó flotando en la cabeza la imagen de su rostro triangular invertido, esa frente ancha que tanto acaricié. Cuando Pete paró el auto, media cuadra más abajo, Carlos ya había entrado a su casa. Yo, en cambio, no me había movido del lugar. Si hubiera tenido ánimo, habría saltado como un manjojo de palomitas de maíz dentro de una olla pero no lo tenía, solo sentía desazón y ansiedad. Una ansiedad que se me escapaba y que hizo que dejara de respirar. Caí al piso, Pete corrió a mi lado y llamó al 911. Me puse morada, como una alérgica que se hubiera puesto miel sobre los brazos y se hubiera crucificado en plena plaza mientras las abejas no dejaban de llegar. Cuando abrí los ojos, lo hice sobre una camilla de hospital. Pete estaba sentado a mi lado y me agarraba la mano. Quería gritar, salir corriendo, insultarlo. Preguntarle si era un idiota. Todo eso que estaba enconado en mi estómago entró como un cormorán en
picada cuando abrí la boca al despertar. No sabía cómo iba a salir pero no pensaba hacer nada hasta que empezara a supurar. En su lugar dije algo incongruente y preocupé sin necesidad a Pete, que pensó que quizá me había dado un derrame. Lo único que me impidió seguir con la farsa fue mi falta de un seguro médico. Cuando escuché que querían hacer unas pruebas, pedí unos formularios y firmé mi salida bajo mi responsabilidad. El resultado inmediato fue que salí del hospital y él me siguió sosteniendo la mano cuando me levanté de la silla de ruedas. Cuando vi que conducía hacia su casa le pedí que, por favor, me dejara en la mía. No iba a discutir conmigo, comenzaba a amanecer. Tenía un trabajo al cual dirigirse. Cuando me dejó frente a la puerta de mi casa, me besó en la boca. Yo estaba tan seca como una tira de velcro. Se alejó sin darse vuelta una sola vez. Tomé una ducha, salí a trabajar y por la tarde fui a visitar a mi madre. No lograba explicarme por qué necesitaba verla, pero era así. Me tomó fuera de juego, se preocupó por mí, actuó como si estuviera bien y no entendiera qué hacía en ese cuarto compartido con cuatro mujeres, ni por qué yo me veía tan mal. Me tomó de la mano y me llevó a pasear por los jardines. Acepté ese cambio de roles con gratitud y, caminando junto a ella, dejé atrás mi malhumor. Después que me cepilló el cabello, fui a la casa y dormí como no lo había hecho en años. Mark timbró pero no le abrí, nadie llamó al teléfono. Decidí reorganizar mi vida y comencé por cortarme el pelo. Cuando volví donde mi madre, sin amargura, reconoci que regresábamos al primer casillero. No sabía quién era y aun así decidió confiarme sus recuerdos. Me volvió a contar el encuentro con mi
Padre pero esta vez no lo hizo rememorándolo sino reviviéndolo. Nunca me lo había contado así. Si íbamos avanzando por el tablero o por lo menos lo habíamos vuelto a armar, eso me hizo perder un turno. No podía escucharla hablar de esa entrega sin condiciones sin pensar en Pete o en Carlos. Le di un beso en la frente y me fui. Cuando llegué a mi casa preparé una jarra de pisco sour y me empalagué con él antes de que apareciera Mark. Quería saber mi opinión. Le había pedido un préstamo a su mamá y al día siguiente salía en un bus de Greyhound a buscar a George. Le pregunté quién era George. Abrió una página mal doblada que sacó del bolsillo trasero de su pantalón y me la entregó: era la imagen del hombre más guapo que hubiera visto en mi vida. Mark era flaco, tenía una pelada del tamaño de un frisbee en la coronilla y manchas de hígado en las manos. George era el amor que Mark había descubierto por internet, ahora que tenía tiempo para navegar porque estaba sin trabajo y no había hecho nada por buscar otro. ¿Te dijo que fueras?, le volví a preguntar, como si algo hubiera cambiado desde la última vez que le pregunté lo mismo. Negó con la cabeza. ¿El te dio su dirección? No, respondió. ¿Estás seguro de que ese es él?, señalé la foto. Volvió a negar, pero añadió que esa era la foto que le había enviado. Le entregué una copa y le servi un pisco sour. Cuando estaba por el cuarto vaso, le dije que me parecía bien que fuera a buscarlo. Que el que no arriesga, no gana. Para ese momento lo único que quería era arrastrarme hasta mi cama. No sé quién cerró la puerta de la calle.

Pete no volvió a llamar, Carlos no volvió a llamar. Yo no llamé a nadie. Mi madre siguió sin reconocerme.
Yo no hacía más que trabajar y volver a mi casa y beber todas las noches antes de caer rendida. Las noches eran largas. Había dejado de usar sombras en los ojos y desde que me corté el pelo apenas me pasaba la mano sobre él para arreglármelo. Mi supervisor no decía nada pero cada vez que lo cruzaba notaba que me observaba, como si quisiera hacerlo, solo que no surgía la ocasión. Una noche, Mark volvió a tocar a la puerta. Se veía horrible, como si una vaca le hubiera lamido la cabeza y su baba se hubiera quedado ahí, fermentando. Lo dejé sentado y entré a buscar una jarra de agua. No parecía necesitar otra cosa. No dije nada y él no dijo nada. Parecía vacío, y bebí y yo bebí con él. Cuando me paré a traer la segunda jarra, me contó su historia mientras una medialuna de agua se le formaba bajo los ojos de carnero degollado. Lloró, gritó, se desesperó mientras yo escuchaba su discurso algo melodramático pero, sobre todo, previsible. No estaba esperando que le dijera te lo dije, porque nunca le dije que las cosas saldrían mal. Solo lo pensé. El hombre que hizo fantasear a Mark estaba casado, vivía en un barrio acomodado de Carolina del Norte, tenía un carro del tamaño de una piscina y un seguro de vida, así como treinta años más que en la foto, aunque Mark comenzó por contarme que no era el de la foto. Cuando lo vio llegar, cuando vio que Mark avanzaba en su dirección para besarlo, tomó el teléfono y llamó a la policía. Lo acusó de intento de robo, de desvarío y de invasión de propiedad privada. Mark me contó que lo que más le dolió fue que cuando vio a la esposa de George, ella no pareció escandalizarse, que adoptó una expresión de resignación que osciló entre otra vez y cuándo va a acabar esto.
Y entonces Mark me dijo que se sintió usado y yo me paré y lo besé. Ese era el tipo de razonamiento que yo necesitaba. Si yo hubiera sido Mark, lo único que habría pensado era que nunca sería otra cosa que ese tipo al que toda la vida le faltó otra cara, unos mejores ingresos, una mata frondosa de cabello. Y veinte años menos.
A Leda le hubiera encantado torcer con sus dedos de mujer envejecida el cuello de cisne negro que tenía su marido, el esmeraldeño Júpiter Salcedo, pero se reprimía cada vez que le entraban las ganas irreprimibles de hacerlo, porque la piedad que sentía por él era superior a todo el resentimiento que éste le inspiraba.

Júpiter Salcedo, sesentón de facha atlética y de chequera nada raquítica, administraba, desde hacía unas tres décadas, una próspera farmacia —atiborrada en la actualidad por luces fluorescentes, fármacos legales, talcos, desodorantes, pañales desechables, preservativos, toallas sanitarias, perfumes y todo ese menaje propio de cualquier farmacia de la mejor raza—, la que había pertenecido a su familia desde la época en la que se desató en la provincia verde una fiera pugna racial entre los negros lavados y los negros definitivamente negros.

En medio de tal barahúnda, cuando los muertos y heridos estaban a la orden del día, el abuelo materno de Júpiter, un jamaiquino con apellido de whisky escocés y con un estimable conocimiento de la medicina herbolaria, instaló en una esquina de la manzana principal de la ciudad —en la que se asentaban la Catedral, el Registro Civil y el Municipio—
una tolda bajo la cual por años se dedicó a recetar a su nume-
rosa clientela medicinas exóticas y casi milagrosas cuyas
fórmulas sólo él las sabía. La tolda, con el paso del tiempo,
fue adquiriendo las características de una botica propiamente
dicha, por lo que el herbolario tuvo que sacar su negocio de
debajo de su techumbre de lona para que pasara a ocupar,
pero siempre en la misma esquina, un local de cemento ar-
mado y de puertas corredizas que ya a la mitad del siglo XX
llegó a alcanzar la extensión de un cuarto de manzana.

Leda, quien no tenía cuello de cisne pero sí unas lán-
guidas piernas de cigüeña mulata, había conocido al farma-
céutico treinta años atrás, justo cuando ella había recién aus-
tado los dieciocho años de edad y justo cuando empezaba a
escuchar, con la debida atención, la letra de los boleros ran-
cheros de Javier Solís.

Entabló amistad con Júpiter sin casi haberlo deseado
(hasta ahí no le había interesado mayormente cruzar más que
las palabras necesarias con quien, mes a mes, le vendía las,
en ese entonces, nada discretas cajas de toallas sanitarias) en
una madrugada en la que el último vastago de su madre (ve-
nido al mundo hacía pocos días) se retorcía de dolor a causa
de un sobrecargado cólico de gases. Ante el llanto que no
cesaba, la madre le pidió a la hija (la mayor de cuatro herma-
nos) que cruzara la calle para que comprara en la botica, que
afortunadamente estaba de turno, un sobre de anís estrellado,
cosa que Leda hizo en compañía de una amiga con la cual
había estado estudiando el examen de Anatomía que debía
rendir en su colegio al día siguiente.

Júpiter, quien por ese entonces ni de lejos tenía el mal
carácter que tendría varios años después, no sólo que le ven-
dio varios sobres de anís estrellado a precio sospechosamente ínfimo, sino que, además, puso entre las manos de su vecina, cuyas lánguidas piernas él había admirado a su placer desde tras el mostrador de su farmacia, un frasco de un líquido color rojo púrpura que, según él (y según lo que le había enseñado su abuelo) tenía la virtud de cortar a raya cualquier clase de cólico, aún hasta el más insoportable.

A partir de esa madrugada, Leda quedó prendada con la conversación del cisne, por lo que, de ahí en adelante, buscó cualquier pretexto para poder acercarse hasta éste: así, iba a la farmacia en búsqueda de acetona con la cual quitarse el esmalte de sus largas uñas o iba a adquirir pastillas antiespasmódicas con las cuales pretendía hacer que desaparecieran los dolorosos espasmos que atacaban a su vientre en los consabidos días escarlatas o iba para comprar píldoras que tuvieran la virtud de arrancarle de cuajo todo el frondoso sueño que se apoderaba de ella, en época de exámenes, en cuanto abría uno de sus cuadernos colegiales para ponerse a estudiar materias abominables que detestaba, pero que igual debía memorizarlas para poder aprobar su último año de colegio.

También, con cualquier pretexto, su madre la enviaba a la farmacia de los Salcedo a comprar lo que fuera, pues en nada le disgustaba la idea de que su hija mayor pudiera llegar a gustarle más de la cuenta —pues de eso se trataba— al moreno con boca de trompetista de Jazz que entre sus muchos atributos contaba con el de ser hijo único, lo que significaba que algún día, quizás no tan lejano, pasaría a convertirse en dueño absoluto de la farmacia.

A los dos años de enamoramiento, cuando desde hacía rato habían pasado de los besamanos a los besadados
prolongados, se casaron con la anuencia complacida de sus respectivas familias, pues no sólo que en lo estético hacían una atractiva pareja (cisne negro con mulata lavada), sino que también, al comparar sus correspondientes fortunas familiares saltaba a la vista que éstas acusaban entre sí una visible paridad monetaria.

Durante un tiempo considerable las cosas marcharon con bastante normalidad en el matrimonio (aunque Leda siempre sintió que el piso que tenía bajo sus pies ofrecía una consistencia ambigua, como si su hogar se hubiera fundado sobre un espacio sin fondo definido). A los pocos meses de haber firmado papeles en el Registro Civil, nació Helena, y un año después de este advenimiento vino al mundo Theobaldo.

Mientras los chicos estuvieron chicos, los problemas no pasaron a mayores, y ya cuando los chicos se hicieron grandes, las cosas tampoco presentaron resquebrajaduras irreparables. El conflicto empezó a tomar cuerpo cuando Leda y Júpiter dieron claras muestras de que envejecían. Así, después de un cuarto de siglo juntos (pero no revueltos) a Leda le dijo por hacer diarios balances vivenciales en los que siempre la vida le presentaba un inquietante saldo en contra. Y a Júpiter le dio, en cambio, por hacerle honor a su nombre: se convirtió pues, en una divinidad autoritaria y su carácter, que nunca había sido el de una mansa paloma, se agrió de tal manera, que Leda y sus hijos optaron por sólo tener contacto directo con él cuando esto les era estrictamente indispensable.

Por los problemas más mínimos, Júpiter tonante explotaba como un volcán repleto de purulencias; por los pretex-
tos más sosos, Júpiter Salcedo lanzaba a la cara de quien fue-ra improperios y medio. Se convirtió de hombre de carácter difícil en hombre de carácter imposible (imposible de soportar). No obstante, no derivó del todo en un hombre amargado por completo; su agresividad no era una condición permanente: desaparecía como por encanto una vez que la desfogaba por cualquier desfogadero o una vez que su condición de fiera se dulcificaba cuando algo o alguien concitaba su total atención (lo que acontecía cuando supervisaba las ventas en su botica abierta o cuando, por las tardes, jugaba cuarenta con mujeres de a veinte).

Era, pues, un neurótico intermitente, pero distaba mucho de ser un sujeto lo que se dice «malo», y la certeza que Leda siempre había tenido de esto último era lo que la frenaba a raya en el momento de querer encender los motores para remontar un vuelo, sólo de ida, que pusiera una infinita distancia entre la neurosis de él y la cada vez más agotada paciencia de ella (como también la frenaba a raya el hecho de que Júpiter siempre había demostrado ser un por demás amoroso padre).

Durante las horas en las que el farmacéutico permanecía en su negocio –sólo en plan de vigilar lo que vendían sus empleados, pues hacía mucho que él ya no se encargaba de despachar fármacos de ninguna especie–, Leda respiraba a sus completas anchas, agradeciéndole a la providencia las ocho horas de paz que tan graciosamente le concedía; lapso al que le sacaba el mayor provecho posible, pues ni bien Júpiter bajaba las escaleras, ella se encasquetaba un turbante de tono escarlata y una batona de seda que se le pegaba al cuerpo (todavía proclive a experimentar movimientos telúricos de
mediana intensidad) para, inmediatamente, luego de darle una que otra indicación a la mucama (que también quería respirar a sus completas anchas) lanzarse a la calle con tal despreocupada frescura que diríase que estaba poseída por el total convencimiento de que no tenía que rendirle cuentas a nadie de sus actos, ni siquiera a sus hijos que ya hacía algún tiempo —no mucho— se habían ido de la casa (cada quien con su respectiva y jugosa media naranja).

En la esquina opuesta a aquella en la que estaba situada la farmacia, Leda esperaba a que pasara una de las furgonetas que recorrían de extremo a extremo el malecón, y sólo se trepaba en aquella que se estacionaba sin mayor prisa, con serenidad morosa, al pie del apeadero.

Cuando la furgoneta llegaba al barrio en el que vivía Helena —al que su hija se había mudado hacía muy poco para convivir, en unión libre, con un ingeniero petroquímico—, Leda se bajaba del transporte con la misma parsimonia con la que poco antes se había subido, y entonces enfilaba hacia una calle peatonal para caminar en bajada alrededor de unas tres cuadras (que era la distancia que mediaba entre el malecón y la casa de Helena). Con su hija conversaba unos cuantos minutos de todo y de nada, y cuando ya hasta el tema de «la nada» quedaba agotado, se despedía con su típica calidez de gallina clueca para volver a caminar, pero esta vez en subida, las tres cuadras que la separaban del mar. Ya en el malecón cogía otra furgoneta, pero esta vez para dirigirse más hacia el sur de la ciudad, hasta un poco más allá del camal municipal en cuyas inmediaciones —impregnadas con un olor a mortecina de vaca y de hot dog callejero— vivía su hijo Theobaldo, pintor joven y ya bastante cotizado en el provinciano
medio artístico, quien solía usar una tensa cola de caballo cuando se plantaba horas de horas frente a un caballete con el exclusivo propósito de pintar, con finos pinceles de pelo de camello, innumerables retratos de los angelitos negros que brotaban incontenibles del rostro de la modelo mulata que posaba para él, con paciencia estoica, durante todo el día (paciencia que era premiada con creces por las noches cuando el pintor tenía que posar desnudo para ella, parado en un solo pie, en largas sesiones de un amor más excéntrico que placentero).

En lo atinente a sus hijos, Leda no había tenido mayores preocupaciones: los dos vivían como habían escogido vivir, y los dos, al menos por el momento, eran amados. Pero en lo atinente a ella, Leda tenía motivos más que de sobra para sentirse preocupada: Había entrado al crepúsculo de los dioses sintiendo que había dejado de ser querida (si es que en realidad había sido querida de verdad alguna vez en tiempos pretéritos).

Desde hacía cuatro años atrás, su marido se le había alejado con pasos agigantados, a tal punto que ya ni siquiera le arrancaba ni un bostezo a quien antaño se hubiera arrancado los pelos del pecho por un solo beso de ella. Queriendo encontrar alguna justificación para tanta frialdad, Leda pensó en que lo que le acontecía a ella podía ser lo mismo que les acontece a muchas mujeres casadas cuyos metales han envejecido (en partes en las que es imperdonable envejecer), quienes un buen día despiertan con la angustiosa sensación de que sus maridos las han reemplazado con mujeres más jóvenes.

Leda quiso saber quién era —y cómo era— la amante de Júpiter, para lo cual contrató los servicios de un detective
privado que le fue recomendado por una amiga —también otoñal y engañada—, la que gracias al olfato para oler adulterios que demostró poseer el investigador, había podido pescar al sibarita de su consorte cometiendo sibaritismos y medio en medio de las sábanas moradas de un motel de medio pelo.

El detective —un ex-agente de policía que hablaba poco y cobraba mucho— después de escuchar las sospechas de Leda acerca de la discutible fidelidad de su esposo, le pidió a ésta que le proporcionara información de primera mano para así poder empezar a seguirle la pista al presunto infiel; es decir que le dijera dónde iba éste después de cerrar la farmacia y qué hacía los fines de semana y el resto del tiempo que permanecía fuera de la casa, a lo que Leda le respondió que de haber ella poseído toda esa información, simplemente no hubiera tenido necesidad de contratarlo. Con todo, le proporcionó al sabueso un dato bastante significativo cuando le informó que algunas veces había visto dirigirse a Júpiter con dirección hacia el sudeste, más específicamente con dirección a la barriada en la que viven aquellas familias por generaciones dedicadas a la labor de tejer redes.

A la semana justa de haber hecho contacto con el detective, éste la llamó por teléfono para pedirle que se acercara hasta su oficina —un cuartucho del porte de un ascensor que carecía de ventanas— ya que el caso que le había encomendado lo tenía «casi del todo resuelto».

Frente al detective la asaltó por un instante la duda de si en realidad quería saber o no la causa por la cual su marido le había dado de baja como mujer, pero se decidió finalmente por conocer la verdad a secas; revelación que le llegó
en forma de un abanico de fotos, cuatro en total, en cada una de las cuales aparecía Júpiter abrazando, en cuatro escenarios distintos y de cuatro maneras diferentes, a una sola zorra verdadera.

Leda miró brevemente las fotografías, y sin decir mayor cosa —cosa que le agradó al detective quien era más afecto a los hechos que a las palabras— sacó de su cartera un abanico de billetes grandes cuyo monto pareció satisfacer al pesquisa, pues éste, luego de sopesarlo, se lo introdujo por alguna parte de su vestimenta al tiempo que esbozaba una parca sonrisa.

Ya en su casa se sintió, por primera vez en mucho tiempo, dueña absoluta de la verdad, y esta posesión le confirió una entereza de ánimo tal, que deseó en esos momentos tener frente a sí a su marido para blandir frente a su cara el abanico de fotos por el cual tan caro había pagado.

Cuando el cisne irrumpió en el dormitorio —que, pese a todo, aún compartían— Leda sin descender de su escaño de diva muda del cine parlante, lo miró de arriba a abajo y deteniendo sus ojos en los zapatos de él, le extendió las cuatro cartas del triunfo que previamente había sacado de una manga de su batona de seda.

Pero en vez de blandirlas furiosamente frente a la nariz de jazz del trompetista —como había sido su intención original—, agitó las fotos leve y lentamente ante los ojos de éste antes de proceder a hacerlas pedacitos entre sus dedos de mujer gravemente agraviada. Pero Júpiter no se inmutó ni un ápice por este incidente de las fotografías, pues, a lo largo de su dilatada vida matrimonial había aprendido —entre una infinidad de cosas— que su esposa, cuando de veras se
indignaba, apenas si llegaba a asumir un aire de cigüeña ofendida, pero que de ahí no pasaba (jamás el aire se transformaba en ventisca, peor en un tornado que amenazara con tirar al suelo lo que hasta ese momento los dos habían construido).

Decidido a lograr que Leda comprendiera que sus urgencias hormonales de hombre sesentañero y putañero no podían, por ningún motivo, ser dilapidadas en el lago apacible de los cisnes en el que ella últimamente se había convertido, Júpiter pensó que había llegado el momento de hablar claro, de proponerle un trato bipartito para que así ninguno de los dos saliera perdiendo a causa de una situación que bien manejada (manejada con sentido utilitarista) no tenía por qué acarrear consecuencias desagradables (como la de dañar la imagen de matrimonio estable y bien avenido que ambos habían contribuido a configurar a lo largo de los años a base de apariencias, disimulos y más convencionalismos), reflexión por la cual Júpiter, después de que las aguas de Leda volvieran a sus habituales cauces, le preguntó a ésta que qué era lo que tenía pensado hacer ahora que se había enterado «de ciertas cosas», y antes de que ella pudiera darle cualquier respuesta a lo inquirido, él volvió a intervenir, diciendo categóricamente que «en lo tocante a su persona no tenía pensado efectuar ningún cambio visible, pues hasta ahí había sabido llevar las cosas tan bien, lo que se dice «tan bien», que, pese a que ya llevaba algún tiempo de relaciones con la mujer de la foto, se había cuidado —y a ella le constaba— de que su conducta no despertaba la mínima sospecha por lo que se sentía facultado a retarla a que le dijera en su cara si alguna noche él había faltado a su casa o si alguna vez había
tenido la audacia de presentarse ante ella con su trompa de trompetista hinchada a más no poder a causa de los besos y mordiscos con los que suele venir acompañada cualquier relación adúltera que peca de indiscreta.

Leda, que era enemiga de los melodramas –tanto de los caros cuanto de los baratos– y que siempre había considerado de pésimo gusto desgastar esfuerzos estériles en causas desde siempre perdidas, sintió que lo que decía su marido era de lo más razonable; y también sintió –aunque con un intenso dolor de por medio– que ya era demasiado tarde para que se pusiera a enrostrarle, frente al rostro cínico de Júpiter, lo mal que se sentía después de haber descubierto que él la había expulsado de su contexto vivencial (sin aviso de desahucio, intempestivamente, sólo porque así se lo habían ordenado sus hormonas morbosientas).

Al día siguiente, ni bien el farmacéutico salió de la casa con rumbo a su negocio, Leda se vistió con una angustiosa prisa, como si a partir de ese instante se hubiera constituido en cuestión de vida o muerte ganarle la carrera al tiempo (que últimamente corría a medio palmo de ella batiendo a toda máquina las aletas impiadosas de sus talones). Como una exhalación bajó las escaleras, como una exhalación cruzó la calle hasta que ganó el apeadero. Ahí esperó apenas unos cuantos instantes hasta que también, como una exhalación, se estacionó fugazmente junto a ella una nerviosa furgoneta, transporte al que se trepó y del cual no se bajó ni al pasar por el barrio de Helena, ni al llegar al barrio de Theobaldo, pues en esta ocasión iba decidida a ir hasta el mismo final de la ruta, a averiguar, por sí misma, qué tan cierto era lo que le había contado su amiga otoñal y traicionada con respecto a
los atractivos carnales que ofrecía el pequeño balneario que recientemente había inaugurado –con merenderos, vestidores, salvavidas y demás aditamentos– la Muy Ilustre Municipalidad de la ciudad en una honda hondonada en la cual (siempre según lo que le había dicho su amiga) abundaban hombres, bajeles de baja eslora y palmeras estériles (es decir, palmeras sin cocos).

Caminó alrededor de tres cuadras –¿por qué tenía siempre que caminar tres cuadras antes de llegar a cualquier parte?– hasta que sus sandalias se hundieron parcialmente en la arena mojada. Por ahí descubrió una canoa abandonada que yacía boca abajo, y decidió auparse en el lomo de ésta por un tiempo dilatado (el que necesitaba para suturar su herida abierta).

Permaneció por unas tres horas seguidas con la mirada fija en el océano –¿por qué siempre tenía que cavilar tres horas seguidas antes de volver a sentir que ya la asfixia había dejado de asfixiarla?–, lapso en el cual pasaron sobre ella varias bandadas de gaviotas verdes y lapso en el cual pasaron junto a ella unas cuantas personas –no muchas, pues era un día laborable– en las cuales no reparó mayormente, entretenida como estaba en sólo observar las lejanas lejanías del océano. En quienes sí reparó detenidamente fue en tres mozuelos jóvenes que por varias ocasiones habían zumbado a su alrededor dirigiéndole, en los primeros asedios, miradas esquivas que a poco, en los asedios posteriores, fueron transformándose en miradas palpablemente insolentes.

Leda, que sabía dar el cambio justo en materia de canjes de miradas, también terminó por mirar insolentemente a los jóvenes en los que tanto interés había despertado: eran
cisnes trigueños, eran cisnes fuertes, eran cisnes jóvenes, rudos, elásticos y lustrosos; eran cisnes cuyos torsos desnudos constituían toda una invitación para alrededor de ellos colocar bridas de saliva plateada, de esas que suelen ser trenzadas por la imaginación calurosa de ciertas maduras mujeres.

Júpiter siguió durmiendo sobre la mitad de la cama que le pertenecía —la otra mitad estaba ocupada por un resentimiento lleno de tristeza—, siguió comiendo de su mismo plato y siguió haciendo sus necesidades fisiológicas en la misma taza de su excusado. Nada cambió para el cisne cuello negro después de que fueran conocidas por Leda sus oscuras veleidades: siguió abriendo y cerrando su botica y siguió perdiéndose, como si nada, en los estertores últimos de cada madrugada.

Todos los miércoles y viernes soy infaltable a la playita. Todos los miércoles y viernes dejo de ser la incondicional, la que sólo sabe comprender y perdonar, la alcahueta número uno de su marido, para pasar a ser la Leda que desesperadamente busca ser amada antes de que el tiempo la convierta en pasto semicalcinado de las llamas. Todos los miércoles y viernes vengo hasta aquí. Me trepo en la canoa abandonada y desde ésta clavo en el horizonte mis ojos transparentes con la fijeza hipnótica de los que buscan ser amatoryamente correspondidos (mis ojos todavía llenos de deseos y todavía altamente deseables).

No soy quien para averiguar qué es lo que traerá para mí el futuro cercano, lo que sí puedo estar adelantando es que, de un momento a otro, no voy a poder resistirme a los llamados que desde algún punto todavía cercano del mar me

-117-
hace uno de los tres mozuelos: aquel que en estos momentos agita en una de sus manos una pantaloneta de baño color escarlata, como para indicarme que se ha quedado desnudo, como para invitarme a que vaya a retozar con él, señales que también tienen la virtud de revelarme que es un verdadero desperdicio seguir sentada sobre esta canoa cuando en medio de las olas espera por mí una parte de vida sobre la que aún no he cabalgado.
La mujer que extravió su cuerpo

Rosa Amelia Alvarado

Era una mujer de sesenta años que un día se levantó de la vasta soledad de su cama king size intrigada por un mal sueño y al incorporarse para ponerse las pantuflas mullidas con las que protegía sus pies artríticos de los vientos cortantes de la mañana, la violencia extrema de una íntima verdad develada por el sueño la detuvo en seco y rompió en dos su rutina. Se dio cuenta, abruptamente, de que no había conocido lo que era el amor en su vida. Perdón, no era el amor. Ella quiso decir y no se atrevió: el orgasmo. O quizá ni amor, ni placer, ni nada que se le pareciera, no estaba segura. Esta verdad que nunca había querido admitir, que se había negado como gato panza arriba a plantearse en lo profundo de su corazón, la sentó de piano en el presente inadvertido por la rutina e hizo que se detuviera a mirar sin ver por la ventana haciendo un inventario de todo aquello que pudo haber sido y no fue. Se daba cuenta de que unos habían sido sus sueños y otra la realidad, como cuando uno se choca por la noche contra un muro oscuro y se rompe de pronto los dientes.
Aminta Buenano

A lo lejos, en el azul lechoso del día recién nacido, unas gaviotas dibujaban pasos de ballet mientras las nubes al igual que sus recuerdos se arremolinaban furiosas huyendo de la oscuridad para beber sedientas del sol sangrante que despuntaba.

Se llamaba María y había sido educada en la fe y en las buenas costumbres. Antes de saber hablar aprendió el tira y jala de las relaciones con el sexo opuesto. Supo por su padre del código civil y la obediencia a las leyes. Conoció por su madre todas las prohibiciones y convenciones sociales: la filosofía de la media sonrisa, de la esfinge, de las piernas cruzadas, de las apariencias y de cuando el no significaba sí. Y pensó, en última instancia, que quizá la obediencia significaba felicidad.

Decidió en silencio no dejarse llevar por sus sentidos, ni por sus instintos, ni por sus emociones. No, a ella no la controlarían como a su madre. Ella no dejaría que el cordón invisible del afecto la amarrara a la pata de la mesa, ella no sucumbiría al amor, ni tendría la debilidad de dejarse arrastrar por la fuerza de los hijos, ni sería tan tonta como para dejarse convencer por palabras espolvoreadas de azúcar, ni sería débil, ni frágil, ni abnegada. No, ella estaba cansada de todo lo que eran hemorragias. Hemorragias de lágrimas, hemorragias de sangre, hemorragias de emociones. Las mujeres de su familia solo sabían de ojos enrojecidos, pañuelos y oraciones. Las mujeres de su familia hablaban de penas, dudas y traiciones como quien habla del sustento diario. No, ella sería la razón, la conveniencia, no el sentimiento, planearía estratégicamente su vida para que fuera como ella quería: un triunfo completo sobre la vida y no el desmadre de sentimientos y emociones absurdas por el que se habían
perdido las hembras de su familia. Lo pensó por mucho tiempo de manera instintiva, pero como suele ocurrir con las determinaciones adolescentes lo olvidó cuando empezó a crecer. Solo que no lo había olvidado del todo porque como una polilla que va carcomiendo lenta la madera esas ideas se habían infiltrado sutilmente muy dentro de sí en un lugar remoto de su consciencia en donde no llegaban los bastonazos de la razón, ni siquiera el desconcierto de los sentidos y eran las que le dictaban comportamientos extraños, sensaciones dolorosas, obsesiones inconfensables, hincones como astillas, que hacían que los demás la tildaran de “rara”, caprichosa, un poco loca.

Cuando se enamoró por primera vez su corazón anémico advirtió que lo estaba solo cuando el joven imberbe y lleno de espasmos amorosos se lo confesó al oído y ella confundió el cosquilleo cálido en las orejas con el amor. Siempre era una tranquilidad saberse amada, se sentía segura. Siempre era bueno saber que alguien agonizaba por ella, temblaba de puro amor dispuesto a dar hasta la vida por un beso, un abrazo o la esperanza de algo más. Entonces ella podía aflojar un poquito, tironear, ajustar las tuercas y sentir que por fin tenía algo de ese control que se le escapaba como arena entre los dedos. Tirar de afuera las redes del amor, no dejarse atrapar, porque entonces como un pez agónico podía morir.

Luego de la revelación de este amor vino José, después Pedro, más tarde Elías, todos estudiados como un entomólogo observa su tesoro tras la lupa. Pero a quien finalmente dio el sí de matrimonio fue a la seguridad de aquel mercader árabe de intensos ojos negros y pestanas de dromedario, quien tenía una renta propicia y un negocio pujante,
que administraba devotamente su almacén de telas con la misma concentración extática con que la escuchaba y que cuando la miró por primera vez convirtió sus ojos en alfombras mágicas en donde ella volaba con la majestad del visir de los cuentos orientales. Las noches con él, luego de una breve y tradicional luna de miel, fueron mortalmente tediosas.

El hombre se obligaba todos los días a cumplir religiosamente sus deberes conyugales con la misma fidelidad que lo hacía con las oraciones y ella a mirar hacia el techo, leer el periódico, ver la televisión mientras el hombre se afanaba como un poseso buscando sacar un gemido, un breve aunque diminuto aullido de placer de aquel cuerpo blando y delicado extendido frente a él como un paño de seda con una etiqueta invisible que decía ocúpate pero no me molestes. Luego el mercader se volvió egoísta, ya no esperaba nada, no le suplicaba que gimiera como gata en celo, que llorara aunque fuera mentira, que hiciera esos ruiditos golosos que lo volvían loco; ni siquiera se sacaba la camisa, la abrazaba urgido de deseos como un leno encendido, tomaba lo suyo y luego se viraba a roncar a pierna suelta como si ella fuera el resultado de una opípara cena de la que hiciera su siesta. La situación fue tan desagradable que ella empezó a alegar razones para llegar tarde al lecho y eran el racimo de platos que esperaban en la cocina hasta la medianoche, las cuentas rezagadas de la tienda y la limpieza inagotable de una casa ya limpia.

Su vida con el mercader se convirtió en un asunto del pasado cuando lo encontró con la muchachita delgada y ojerosa, dependiente del almacén, a horcajadas sobre el cuerpo velludo, de semental al acecho, de su marido, en la fresca
La mujer que extravió su cuerpo

oscuridad de la bodega en donde guardaba las telas y los paños. Salía de aquel trance de su vida como se sale de una iglesia después de confesar todos los pecados, en santa paz, con mucho dinero en el bolsillo y los desesperados ruegos del contrito marido que alegaba amarla aún más que nunca, y bien sujeta a la mirada rendida del abogado tenaz que la ayudó con el pleito y que se enamoró perdidamente de ella porque entre tantos ayes y cuítas él reparó en la abundante belleza de sus pechos blancos que subían y bajaban al compás de sus copiosas lágrimas y en la infantil ternura de sus pucheros de reina. Escuchó pacientemente tras el velo oscuro de sus pestañas todas las penas de amor y lo tortuoso de su vida mientras se proponía hacerla feliz, aunque ella nunca lo fue.

Sin saber siquiera por qué, frente a tanta devoción y tanto amor ella permanecía desabrida, indiferente, desleal como si el hecho de procurarle tanto amor era solo la confirmación de la escasa valía, de la poca importancia, del desafortunado abogado que un día enfermó de depresión y terminó deambulando en un asilo de enajenados mentales en donde ella lo visitaba cada domingo con la fidelidad de una antigua parienta aliviada por no tener que cargar con el peso de la enfermedad de un familiar estimado pero abrumador. Y su amor, si es que lo hubo, estaba lleno de pequeños detalles, de prepararle las aguas aromáticas y ponerlas en el termo consolador, en llevarle los cigarritos que le prohibía el médico, en limpiarle la abandonada oficina hasta que brillase como metal pulido, en leerle el periódico y en contarle noticias que se inventaba para hacerle más ligera la existencia en ese hospital de alienados en donde todos arrastraban obsesiones delirantes que caldeaban el
ambiente hasta hacerlo insoportable y él la única obsesión que tenía era aquella mujer cercana pero inaccesible a la que nunca le pudo sacar un quejido de amor, un temblor de su cuerpo, una mirada cargada de pasión, un te quiero aunque sea prestado, algo que tejiera los hilos de ese amor que él guardaba en el pozo insatisfecho de su corazón desde la primera vez que la vio entrar, turgente y altiva, a su oficina de profesional exitoso que en veinte años no había perdido ningún pleito, que en la universidad había acaparado todos los premios y en los mejores foros de la ciudad había triunfado con sus artes de oratoria y que sin embargo había sido incapaz de prender el deseo en la única mujer, entre las cientos que se le ofrecían, que en verdad había amado.

Su preocupación de macho contrariado se convirtió en obsesión, luego en depresión crónica y por último en locura que obligó a que ella dejara de visitarlo porque cada vez que la veía la arrinconaba queriendo hacerle el amor contra la pared, encima de la mesa del desayuno, en el descuajeringado sofá de la sala de estar frente a la mirada expectante y alarmada de los demás pacientes. Dejó de visitarlo aunque rezaba todos los días por él y antes de que muriera lo visitó por última vez solo para generarle, sin querer, sin saber, un último arranque de desesperados celos cuando ella elogió los cabellos oscuros del joven enfermero que lo cuidaba, junto a otro macilento y delgado. Y se marchó pensando no en el abogado que se quedaba solo, enfermo y más triste que nunca, sino en el extraño destello de la mirada ambigua de aquel enfermero de cuerpo de ángel y en la mirada provocadora del otro que no habían dejado de observarla desde que ella acomodó su cuerpo maduro en la silla.
La mujer que extravió su cuerpo

Hasta ese momento, a pesar de que su cuerpo de seda y caderas anchas se iba afirmando en una madurez envidiable, había pasado por la vida sentimental como pasa un cisne por las aguas, sin mojar su corazón. Pero cierta vez, en esos instantes en que solía mirar por la ventana sintiéndose segura y casi feliz de verse rescatada de los desasosiegos de su juventud, al ver que la vida transcurría plana y lineal, sin nada que hiciera que temblara los hilos de la certidumbre, levantándose por las mañanas a regar sus docenas de plantas y darle de comer a los canarios, preparando su desayuno vegetariano y prendiendo su televisor para ver el rosario de telenovelas que mantenía su vida encendida con el interrup
tor de los dramas ajenos, vio que alguien había deslizado a través de su puerta una carta. Alcanzó a ver una sombra que se alejaba tenaz como si un perro le pisara los talones. Se acercó a la puerta y extrajo del sobre un exquisito papel de hilo en el que escrito en estilografía de lujo, con una caligrafía decimonónica, alguien le decía:

Te conozco, te conozco desde hace mucho y desde que te vi hiciste latir mi corazón como si hubiera visto la misma aparición de una Vestal frente a mí. Yo sé que vas a decir que es una exageración pero te pienso y te hablo todas las noches, no hay momento de mi vida que no piense en ti. Tú has compartido conmigo los sueños más desaforados, las imaginaciones más locas y sé que si tú conocieras el tamaño de mi amor también me amarías. Pero te temo, mi amor por ti es tanto que tengo terror de que solo me digas que no y me rechaces.

Quien no te abandona un minuto de tu existencia.

La sombra
Esta carta en lugar de dejarla ensoñada y avivar su curiosidad lo único que consiguió fue que ella pusiera doble cerrojo a su puerta y empezara a sospechar hasta del hombre que le dejaba todos los días el periódico. Su interés, antes que en la cantidad de amor que el hombre prometía, estuvo centrado en el miedo al desconocido, por eso no dejó de advertir al guardián de su barrio sobre figuras extrañas, a la vecina de al lado que solía ir a conversar con ella por las tardes y a su propio corazón para estar alerta ante la eventualidad de un asalto. Cuando ya se había olvidado de la carta y solía recordar como se recuerda a un hermano, a un amigo querido, a sus dos maridos y a sus tantos novios extraviados en el tiempo de la juventud, llegó otra carta misteriosa en la que le decía:

Te he visto, te he visto y te he mirado con pasión, con frenesí, tú no lo has notado, pero tu cuerpo tiene resabios de pasión, de animal lujurioso, de cachalote por aparear. Te miro, te bebo, muerdo tu imagen. Quisiera tenerte junto a mí y acariciarte para que tus aullidos de placer se escuchen hasta la catedral. Quisiera ser una serpiente para enroscarme en tu cintura, un vampiro para beber de tu sangre, el sol para besar tus labios. Estoy loco de amor por ti. Te besa hasta el último vello de tu misteriosa oquedad. Tuyo.

La sombra

Esa última carta la puso como loca porque no recordaba en el último mes haber salido de casa a alguna parte, las únicas pocas veces había ido a la iglesia y a la tienda del barrio, le preocupaba que este hombre pareciera conocerla tanto y
La mujer que extravió su cuerpo

temía que fuera un asaltante, un violador, un delincuente de esos que se dedican a perseguir y asesinar a las mujeres solas. Decidió rápidamente cambiarse y alquilar dormitorios a señoritas pensionistas que estudiaran en la universidad. Cuando se mudó todo volvió a la normalidad, por algunos meses esas extrañas cartas dejaron de llegar, su vida transcurría entre la televisión, el bordado y las conversaciones interminables con las jovencitas que alegraban sus tardes haciéndole confidencias a las que ella procuraba contestar con consejos prestados a las heroínas de las telenovelas y con afirmaciones propias en las que no creía mucho, no por no estar convencida de ellas, sino porque jamás las había puesto en práctica.

No extrañaba nada, no sentía nada y se sentía bien. Las penas, los misterios de la angustia y hasta los sueños no los recordaba y de alguna manera sentía que estaba a salvo, no sabía de qué pero estaba a salvo. Apenas si veía a su familia y le huía porque prefería conocer los dramas ajenos de la televisión a vivir los interminables de su familia. Era más fácil, más liviano.

Una tarde, cuando ella se entretenía hablando con sus pajaritos, una de sus huéspedes le extendió un sobre sin mayor interés, ella pensó enseguida que era alguna factura y la guardó en el bolsillo. Al ir al baño se le cayó y reconoció la letra. La abrió con aprensión y con un temor que la paralizaba: ¡el desconocido estaba cerca! La carta decía:

*No te puedo olvidar, tú estás siempre presente. Nunca he conocido una mujer más voluptuosa, más sensual. Tus nalgas parecen manzanas maduras, me provoca morderlas, es más, una de ellas me pertenece. Cuando te bañas tus*
pezones se oscurecen y tienen la dureza del diamante. Tu cabello es tan largo que podría envolverme en ellos como un sudario. Sueño que ellos sean mi sudario. Te sigo amando, te espero, te sueño.

La sombra

No pudo más y acribilló a la chica con preguntas, solo pudo obtener de ella un asustado: \textit{Yo no sé, estaba detrás de la puerta} y una mirada en la que dudaba de su sanidad mental. Pero el hombre la conocía íntimamente. ¿Acaso la observaba cuando se bañaba? Pero era imposible, no había una ventana, ni el más ligero resquicio en la habitación por donde mirarla. ¿Sería un loco, un desadaptado, alguien que quería jugarle una mala pasada? Se serenó y esperó atenta durante algunos días a que apareciese el desconocido. Era imposible que fuera alguno de sus dos maridos, muerto uno por accidente y el otro por depresión. ¿Sus novios? Pero si ni siquiera se acordaba de sus nombres, debían estar todos casados. ¿Quién sería? Pero detrás de la puerta solo había el silencio. Los días transcurrían monótonos e imperceptibles, pero la correspondencia se empezó a regularizar y cada mes no faltaba el sobre lacrado, la letra decimonónica de caligrafía perfecta y un vaho a lavanda. En cada una de ellas el hombre expresaba sus deseos animales de hacerla suya pero en un lenguaje tierno y amoroso.

El terror que sentía al principio empezó a ceder con el tiempo, hasta se permitía de vez en cuando releer algunas frases para estimar el tamaño de la imbecilidad humana, ¿morirse de deseos?, ¿qué locura! Pero en sus sueños todo lo que el hombre prometía se hacía realidad y ella se despertaba
La mujer que extravió su cuerpo

agitada sintiendo que sus muslos ardían y que el corazón se desbocaba debajo de sus pezones enhiestos como para enfrentar batallas. El desconocido autor se empezó a especializar, en cada carta le hablaba de algún aspecto de su cuerpo. Uno era sobre su ombligo. Al mes siguiente sobre sus cimbreantes caderas, luego sobre sus duros pezones. Después su cuello al que se comería a besos luego de pasarle la lengua. Después los lóbulos de sus orejas a los que chuparía como si fueran diminutas ubres. Más tarde sobre la suavidad de la entrepierna, la delicadeza de los tobillos, los dedos de la mano, las comisuras de los labios. No faltaba la espalda a la que después de un largo y sensual masaje bañaría de vino para calmar su sed de amor. Empezó a enloquecer, el hombre la hacía arder en un fuego incomprendible que ella desconocía y no sabía cómo apagar tanto tormento. Su cuerpo era una cárcel en donde a veces era imposible habitar. Las sensaciones extrañas, inusuales la clavaban en una dolorosa ensoñación con la que no sabía negociar.

Un día decidió no abrir ninguno de aquellos insolentes sobres lacrados. Y se fueron amontonando como se amontonaban en su estudio las facturas después de pagarlas. A veces pasaba cerca de ellos y se resistía a los empujes de su cuerpo por abrirlos. Mi paz no tiene precio repetía con insistencia. Se sentía como una niña pequeña que no había aprobado el primer grado y la obligaban a leer. Los sentidos, esos desconocidos, martillaban su existencia monjil. Hasta que repentinamente, como cuando después de un torrencial aguacero escampa, las cartas dejaron de llegar.

Y su vida se aplanó hasta esa noche, ese brutal sueño en que el desconocido había llegado, había podido sentir su aliento fuerte y viril aplastando su cara en una caricia que
le revolvió los sentidos, sus manos arañar su ropa como si fuera un pájaro caído y su boca prenderse de la suya hasta introducirse en ella con una lengua desaforada y enhiesta que se clavaba en su paladar. Había sentido su cuerpo palpitar furioso y buscar con ímpetu violento y tierno su cuerpo y abrirlo y prenderse de él con el hambre de un naufrago salvaje y se había sentido, enajenada, corresponder a él con una sensación extraña, con un ardor incomprensible, con una salvaje nostalgia de amor torturado y cuando estaba a punto de alzarse como una montaña en erupción las carcajadas fúnebres, torcidas, de sus maridos la detenían y le apostaban con ironía, con rencor, con sarcasmo: Tu tiempo pasó... Y el invencible terror, el miedo a sí misma se afinaba de nuevo y se abriría en una lucidez interminable, en una realidad en que era ella misma y no otra.

Y despertó y despertó con un mal sabor, con el corazón taladrándole los sentidos y el deseo puro de que de una vez por todas, maldita sea, se materializara la sombra, que se hiciera realidad el sueño antes de que fuera demasiado tarde. Y la certeza de la verdad revelada, del terrible miedo que había arrastrado toda la vida hizo que mirara sin ver por la ventana, desechando el día luminoso, las gaviotas volando, la paz silenciosa de su hogar, preguntándose por primera vez con íntima angustia si no sería tarde, demasiado tarde para conocer la asignatura pendiente, si no sería demasiado tarde para comenzar de nuevo...
El castillo

Llevaba prisa, no le había sido fácil llegar al lugar; pese a todo, Candelaria ya estaba allí. Las primeras horas de la mañana eran óptimas, brindaban las condiciones para conocer el sitio. Al llegar bajó del caballo, lo amarró de un árbol y fue hacia la puerta de entrada del castillo. Candelaria era una negra de treinta y dos años, alta y robusta, que de niña había tenido otro nombre, el verdadero, el de sus padres. El Sol encendió sus luces entre los laureles, robles, caobas, afluyan trinos y júbilos de los pájaros enfiestados. El viento invadía su rostro, aún así volvió a sentir la misma tensión reprimida durante su infancia, cuando sus progenitores trabajaban en la hacienda.

Fue en busca del dueño de las tierras que estaban en venta, su deseo era adquirir algunas hectáreas para dedicarse a la agricultura. Candelaria, que había vivido aquella época de grandes pasiones, trató de dominar su inquietud. Desde el amanecer estuvo despierta, con el corazón oprimido por la incerti-
dumbre del negocio. Montó a Pío, su caballo, y fue en busca de las tierras y del castillo. A diferencia de días anteriores en que andaba por su casa con faldas floreadas y blusas de mangas cortas, ahora se había puesto para el viaje un pantalón café de montar, una blusa mangas largas y botas de cuero, que solo por ser nuevas las usó. Era parte de la fortuna que heredó de su ama y que, a pesar de quedarle un poco apretadas, se las puso para impresionar al vendedor. En adelante, prometió no ponérselas jamás y no sabía la bora de sacárselas.

Antes de iniciar el recorrido prendió tres velas verdes a Yemayá, la diosa de los ríos, de los mares y de las lluvias, para conseguir unas buenas tierras donde bastara echar las semillas para que florecieran, ya estaba feliz porque tenía la convicción de que ella le concedería lo que anhelaba.

Candelaria golpeó la puerta del castillo de estilo antiguo, esperó largo tiempo y cuando creyó que no había nadie, asomó un anciano de ojos azules que, al verla, frunció el entrecejo.

El castillo era enorme y sombrío, parecía un viejo convento, de paredes húmedas. El anciano blanco, delgado y con un cigarro en la boca, sin decir una palabra, la observó. No estaba seguro de que se tratara de una interesada en adquirir su castillo, pues era negra. En una ventana colgaba una jaula con un pájaro de color azul. Ella dibujó una sonrisa, al tiempo disimuló su evidente temor ante la reacción del dueño. Ella, desconcertada, con rápidos pa-
sos se acercó, saludándolo con una inclinación de cabeza y él hizo un gesto. Indecisa, Candelaria le preguntó por su salud y le dijo lo hermoso que era el paisaje en ese lugar. Vio que el anciano se puso livido, pero continuó hablando y como la puerta estaba abierta, entró. Y si en un primer momento tuvo la intención de disculparse, a los pocos segundos pensó sería mejor actuar. Se sorprendió de proceder con tanta firmeza. No le hubiera gustado actuar así, no era lo que realmente deseaba, pero aplicó los modos que utilizaban los blancos. El hombre quiso decir algo, tal como: a mi castillo no entran negros, pero su intención quedó ahogada en la garganta. Se hizo un silencio denso y pesado. Candelaria advirtió que continuaba absorto y miraba de arriba abajo. No podía imaginar que aquella mujer tuviera el atreverse de comprar sus tierras con su castillo. Sufrió emociones encontradas, por los sentimientos contradictorios que Candelaria le había provocado. De pronto a él le afloró un tic que le comprometía parte de la boca.

Esperó un rato a que el anciano se calmara, ya comenzaba a sentirse frustrada. Hizo tiempo para que le preguntara el motivo de su visita, sin embargo era como si ella no existiera. La mujer sintió una impresión desagradable, el anciano no le vendería las tierras ni el castillo. Le incomodó que no la hubiera hecho pasar a la sala; la manera de mirarla con altanería y desprecio, estaba sacándola de quicio. Con la inquietud de que no adquiriera las tierras, sentose. El mueble tenía los resortes aflojados.
Había una sola ventana abierta que apenas permitía entrar rayos solares. En esa penumbra con olor a mentol, comenzaron a hablar. La voz del anciano era gangosa y se ahogaba al respirar y de vez en cuando le daba una pitada al cigarro. Al asegurarse de que era ella la interesada en comprar las tierras, frunció los labios y no disimuló sorpresa. Las manos del hombre temblaron, era un anciano que parecía de elevada jerarquía, de carácter extraño, con miradas altivas. Candelaria esperó sin ilusión la respuesta, se le hizo una pelota de lágrimas en la garganta, Yemayá no le negaría ese milagro.

Cuando estaba convencida de que el propietario no haría negocio, pues le observaba con inquietud, lo vio tomarse la cabeza con las dos manos. ¿Cómo iba a ser posible que le ocurriera eso, cómo iba a vender su castillo y sus tierras a una mujer negra. No, no podía sucederle eso. Habría sido capaz de venderlo a la mitad del precio fijado o en último caso, obsequiarlo a un blanco, pero era lo único que poseía. Aquello no tenía sentido, no, no podía venderle su castillo, aunque en ruinas, mantenía su espiral de otros tiempos. Se batía en un mar de dudas, una angustia creciente le oprimía el corazón, de pronto sufrió un ataque de tos y ella le alzó los brazos, le hizo avanzar hacia la ventana, luego con un abanico que vio sobre la mesa, le dio aire. Él la miró algo triste, apenas pudo hablar, le dijo que su hijo Ernesto no estaba en casa.

Cuando se disponía a abandonar el lugar, él le hizo una señal de sentarse, aceptó, pero como el hijo
demoraba en llegar le dijo que volvería otro día, pero su preocupación era de que llegara otro interesado y cerrara negocio.

Ella había previsto regresar lo más pronto posible, para evitar la oscuridad de la noche. Le solicitó permiso para recorrer el castillo, su impresión instantánea fue la de un edificio lúgubre. En medio de espesas sombras se abrió paso, llegó a un corredor más acogedor donde estaban colgados varios retratos iluminados por la luz violeta que proyectaba el Sol. El rostro de un joven con cabello rizado y perfil romano, lucía en todo su esplendor. Candelaria se detuvo a mirarlo, no era bello, pero tenía personalidad definida. Lucía una chaqueta de paño y ella supuso que su madre debía haberse sentido feliz al tener un hijo así.

No volvieron a hablar sobre la venta de las tierras, pero ella se sintió examinada de soslayo; pensó decir algo, se detuvo convencida de que sería mejor que el anciano iniciara la charla; creería, tal vez, que la mujer no tendría cómo pagar el valor de la hacienda, sin lugar a dudas no deseaba tratar negocios con mujeres. La miró como a un bicho raro, seguramente estuvo captando los rasgos de la personalidad de la joven. Ella levantó el rostro, se miró en un espejo que adornaba la sala de espera. Al frente estaba la imagen de una negra de ojos vivaces, labios carnosos, boca grande, frente despejada, nariz chata, sobresalían sus tersas mejillas, se irguió y al sonreír dejó ver sus blanquísimos dientes. El anciano no tuvo otra alternativa que hablar.
Comenzó a disculparse que lo hubiera encontrado en ropa de casa, pues no esperaba ninguna visita y sobre todo tan temprano en la mañana. Candelaria comprendió que había cometido un error al haber llegado a esa hora; le expresó sus disculpas, pero tenía temor a regresar sola, y le pidió no preocuparse.

El veterano fue alejando el miedo y su fastidio, y levantó los ojos para mirarla de frente, ya no parecía tan enojado como al principio. Respiró profundo y apoyándose en el asiento quiso cambiar de posición; al no conseguirlo, comenzó a temblar. Le advino una grave palidez, se sintió ridículo con sus achiques. Candelaria fue en busca de la cocina, dio algunas vueltas hasta encontrarla. Todo estaba en desorden; buscó los fósforos e hizo fuego en una cocina de gas y rápida le preparó una taza de café. Al estar arreglada la mesa, con los fiambres que ella había llevado, ayudó al anciano a sentarse; a él le fascinó lo que estaba servido, tanto que casi dejó vacíos los platos. Al terminar se sintió abrumado y sin inmutarse agradeció.

Ella fue a soltar a Pío para que pastara y luego volvió a dejar en orden la cocina. Ahora él la trató con simpatía, la miraba displicentemente, reafirmando en no venderle su castillo ni sus tierras.

Candelaria continuaba esperando a Ernesto y siguió charlando cortésmente con el propietario, aunque no poseía el nivel intelectual del caballero, ya que había sido criada doméstica y su ama doña Rosario, solo le había enseñado lo indispensable.
Cuando su ama enfermó era ella la que le contestaba la correspondencia. Fue la época en que la doña buscó a Pablo para que me enseñara a tocar la guitarra, así nos fuimos enamorando, él apoyaba su brazo sobre uno de mis senos. Tenía veinticinco años y yo veinte. Pablo, un negro fuerte, parecía un animal de mar, su cuerpo siempre húmedo; cuando lo vi por primera vez me parecía imposible concebir un joven tan hermoso.

Si compro este castillo, iré a buscarlo, pensé. Habíamos aprendido no solo a tocar la guitarra, sino a sonreírle a la vida. Fue precisamente recordar la dicha de esas imágenes las que le hicieron suspirar.

Los ojos del anciano rehuían al ver los de ella, pero al escucharle los suspiros, se encontraban las miradas y, a pesar de su turbación, el anciano esbozaba sonrisas. Candelaria volvió a observarlo, parecía cansado y exclamó, tratando de ponerse de pie, que deseaba ir a la otra sala. Ella le puso en el brazo, él se arrimó hasta quedar sentado en el sofá.

—¡Ah, la vejez!

Lo escuchó quejarse, pero ella se fue a dar hierbas a Pío. El lugar era paradisíaco. Los árboles proyectaban sus sombras en interminable diálogo con el viento. El cielo completamente despejado invitaba a pasear. Despacio fue conociendo la maravilla de bosque que poseía la propiedad. Le oró a Yemayá con voz temblorosa; estaba nerviosa ante la espera del hijo del anciano. Saltó a Pío que, como si conociera la hacienda, la condujo hacia un río de
aguas cristalinas. Recostada en la hierba, esperó que el caballo saciara la sed.

Al volver al castillo, el anciano estaba dormido, tenía la expresión de un bebé. Su rostro pálido y enjuto, inspiraba solidaridad. Fue en busca de una manta para cubrirle las piernas. Candelaria sintió remordimiento por dejarlo solo, pues tosía con frecuencia y temió le volviera el acceso, ya que podría necesitar su ayuda. Al escucharlo roncar dio vueltas por el castillo, subió una caracolada escalera de mármol, que trepaba cinco pisos y parecía una serpiente. Candelaria llegó acezante, le faltaba la respiración, tuvo la iniciativa de entrar en una de las quince alcobas que poseía el castillo. Las paredes empapeladas con tapiz francés, lucían amarillentas, en una esquina una vitrina guardaba figuras de porcelana y al costado había un reclinatorio. Sobre un mueble de caoba reposaba una guitarra. Se la llevó con ella. Esa tarde caminó por la mansión, la sala conservaba su antigua elegancia dormida. Era una estancia grande, del techo colgaban lámparas de vidrio. Las paredes adornadas con espejos de cristal de roca la hacían lucir bella.

Bajó hasta donde descansaba el anciano y comenzó a entonar varias canciones. Estaba lejos de ser una virtuosa de la guitarra, pero deseaba llevarle paz al propietario del castillo. Su voz saltaba de una melodía a otra, las canciones le fueron familiares al anciano, que despertó con los ojos llenos de lágrimas. Creyó vivía un sueño y que su hijo Ernesto,
dueno de la guitarra, había regresado. Candelaria se disculpó, pero no sabía el motivo del sollozo. Él la miró con ojos vacilantes. En realidad, el hombre vivía solo, hacía un año estaba en la más completa soledad y se moría dentro del palacio como en el fondo de un acuario. El castillo con escaleras frías, se había convertido en una fortaleza tenebrosa. El dueño dijo que su hijo Ernesto había salido vestido con un traje gris, un impermeable y en el cuello se había terciado una bufanda; era alto, delgado y sabía tocar la guitarra. No pudo continuar, el llanto le ahogó las palabras. Todavía no puede creer en la muerte de su único hijo.

El hombre había pasado nervioso durante todo el día, ahora una angustia se había apoderado de él, no pudo tranquilizarse. Candelaria le dio a beber un vaso con agua azucarada para calmar los nervios del anciano. Al aproximársele, percibió un tufo por no haberse bañado tiempo atrás. Ella lo llevó al baño donde había una tina con patas de león y sin inmutarse le ayudó a bañarse y terminaron sentados en el crepúsculo.

Allí volvió a cantar; el lugar se encontraba distante y tan solitario que Candelaria supuso serían los únicos habitantes del contorno. El anciano tenía necesidad de hablar y estaba seguro de que ella lo escucharía. Comenzó a recordar los laberintos de su existencia. Se refirió a una extensa playa en la cual se levantaban muchos hoteles, exclusivos para la nobleza. De vacaciones, fue a conocer el lugar, era
un domingo de abril, ya no pudo recordar el año. Se detuvo un momento, puso sus ideas en orden, dijo, el hotel más elegante de la ciudad. Rosa estaba en la playa, cantaba en voz baja, tenía tono de soprano, yo me quedé asombrado al verla brillante como el Sol. Le mandé la primera carta en la que le decía que no tenía culpa por haberme enamorado de ella. Rosa me contestó:
—Preséntese y no perdamos tiempo.
Cuando salió de la angustia y de la sorpresa, le obsequió un anillo de diamante; a los tres meses se casaron y tuvieron a Ernesto. Rosa jamás perdió el entusiasmo por el canto y la guitarra. Murió y luego se llevó el único lazo que me ataba a la vida, mi Ernesto.
—Su pena es mi pena, señor.
Candelaria, con una inclinación de cabeza, se despidió. Al ganar la puerta, respiró aire de verano y de clorofila. Fue en busca de Pío, que continuaba aprovechando el ver dor. Mirando el cielo, sonrió, Yemayá en esta ocasión le había fallado, pero cuando iba a partir, la cara del anciano apareció por la ventana, tenía los ojos colmados de lágrimas. Hizo una señal de espera. Candelaria lo miró paralizada, sin articular palabra, el anciano que con pasos temblorosos se acercaba se aproximó para detenerla, cuando él pudo recuperar la tranquilidad, le dijo:
—Aun sin dinero, te lo doy todo, pero me incluyes.