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Translator's Preface

E. M. Test

One of the greatest frustrations for a translator can be the inability to contact the author and ask about particularities of the text. Fortunately, the works I translate here are written by living authors (Valerie Mejer and Víctor Manuel Mendiola) with whom I have had extensive contact. Any doubts I had about the translations were clarified by dialing a phone number. At times, however, even then the translator stumbles over those untranslatable words, as in the case of "cenote" in "Truces," by Mejer. A "cenote" is a Mayan term for a particular type of sink hole in the Yucatan. The word "sink hole" does not effectively translate the definition of a hole partly filled with water, which has walls on all sides and is formed by the collapse of a cave. I decided to keep the word in its original and provide a note rather than translate it into something that it clearly is not. Inevitably, the translator creates a new poem in the target language, rendering only an approximation of the original. As Borges commented humorously, "The original is unfaithful to the translation."

Translation, like writing, is an ongoing process; we can always go back and tinker with the work as if it were a project still in progress. I first translated Mendiola's poem "The Bride of the Body" for an international conference in Tampico, Mexico, 2004. In my first version, I took liberties and changed some verbs from the past participle into the present tense. Needless to say, it was rather presumptuous on my part, mostly due to my own idiosyncrasies as a poet. Just before the poem was read aloud to the audience, I decided to revert all the verbs back into their original tense, and the poem, of course, became much more fluid.

Translation is a task of compromise and invention, and therefore is particularly susceptible to criticism. In my experience, it is a thankless job. The author, of course, is always pleased with having his/her words transported into another language, but there is always a critic out there ready to pounce upon and dissect the translator's decisions. While the original work may be the definitive text, this is never the case with translation; there is always a new edition to be made, replete with new compromises and new inventions. Translation is a never-ending story.

DE LA NOVIA DEL CUERPO

1.

Aquí veo una mano
y aquí, en el otro extremo,
hallo la otra.
Han descendido
por la pendiente
de mis dos brazos
en un lodo de sangre.
Miro mis manos
sobre la cama
y me dan miedo antes de tocarte.

3.

Roto, adentro de mí,
me coso por afuera.
agujas y tijeras
me colocan los brazos,

pegostean mi cara,
me despuntan el ojo.
He recibido un pie
y he entregado una mano,

he tomado un zapato
y me he puesto un perfume.
Con esa mano pido
a la novia del cuerpo;

con esa mano sola
me pongo una cabeza,
me dibujo la frente,
me acomodo la boca
para morder tus piernas.

SELECTIONS FROM *THE BRIDE OF THE BODY* by Víctor Mendiola*Translated by E.M. Test*

1.

Here, I see a hand
and here, in the other extremity,
I find the other.
They have descended
along the slope
of my two arms
in a clay of blood.
I see my hands
upon the bed
and they make me afraid before I touch you.

3.

Broken on the inside,
I sew up the outside.
needles and scissors
set my arms in place,

affix my face,
prick my eye.
I have received a foot
and have given a hand,

I have taken a shoe
and have put on perfume.
With this hand I ask
the bride of the body;

with only this hand
I put on a head,
I draw a brow,
I adjust my mouth
To bite your legs.