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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.

TREGUAS

Visibles, los esqueletos de las casas, ventanas reunidas como las palabras de una pregunta, alineadas las puertas del sueño, ese suburbio humeante donde es apenas visible: el atajo.

Brusco, el mundo desdentado, y huesos

y huesos

y huesos

ese plantío de huesos que somos en la fila cuando nos piden el boleto y abrimos la mano a una luz sobrenatural y eléctrica. Y entramos al cine,

a una tregua

de dos horas.

Las patas triples de los pájaros no dejaron un sendero claro a ese verde bíblico,

distinto al verde de las carreteras fosforescentes, que camino a Yucatán sombrearon de verde al gato montes y a los apresurados conejos y al agua distante

¿al cenote?

pero no al libro.

Nunca al libro, ni siquiera en sus verdes pasajes,

TRUCES by Valerie Mejer

Translated by E.M. Test

Visible, the skeletons of houses, windows reunited like words of a question, doors of the dream aligned, that steamy suburbia where the short cut is scarcely visible.

Brusque, the toothless world, and bones

and bones

and bones

we are that field of bones in line when they ask us for the ticket and we open our hands to a supernatural and electric light. We enter the movie-theater

to a truce

for two hours.

The triple-toed feet of birds didn't leave a clear path to that biblical green,

distinct from the green of phosphorescent highways, flying to the Yucatan they shadowed in green the mountain lions and the hurried jack rabbits and the distant water —

to the cenote?

but not the Book.

Never the Book, not even in its green passages,

ni sus salmos, ni en sus amenazas apocalípticas. Ni siquiera en su luz sobrenatural.

Bastará con que llegue el día para que la marea borre las huellas que llevan al atajo:

borrará las discretas huellas de las hormigas. Nada quedará de la noche en que hicimos surcos en el aire.

Mientras la carne y los besos nos calmen, mientras los versos y los panes nos ayuden a dejar de pensar en los números del hambre, garabatearemos una luna

vagamente recordada que brilla en una fotografía de Marc Riboud.

Hay un candado al verde
y hay una llave sin duda
pero no siempre.
Algo avanzamos al esperar.
Los instrumentos que están cerca de colapsarse
son los más dóciles a la música.
Y es en ese sonoro
ser casi destruido
que se abre una puerta a la sucesiva llanura.

nor its psalms, nor in its apocalyptic threats. Not even in its supernatural light.

The day's coming is enough for the tide to erase the footprints that lead to the short cut:

it will erase the discrete footprints of ants. Nothing will remain of the night when we made seed holes in the air.

While flesh and kisses
calm us,
While verses and bread
help us stop
thinking about the accounts of the hungry,
we'll scribble a moon
vaguely remembered

shining in a photograph by Marc Riboud.

There is a padlock to the green, and without a doubt a key, but not always.

We advance some by waiting.
Instruments on the verge of collapse are the most sensitive to music.
And it's in this sound
of being almost destroyed
that a door opens onto the next field.

Note

A *cenote* is a partly water-filled, wall-sided sinkhole, formed by the collapse of a cave. They are very common in Yucatan, México, where a large cave system with many entrances is filled with water.

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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 Victor 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.