

Translation by Andrea G. Labinger

Commentary by Ana María Shua

It all began with an Argentine literary magazine's call for material on the topic "The Woman in My Life." The theme of this particular edition was "the bed." They asked me to write a story with any interpretation I preferred, as long as the theme had to do with the bed (not necessarily a round one, though).

I thought it would be a challenge to go beyond the obvious erotic connection. Just then I recalled my own experiences in the 1970s with water beds (more comic than erotic, I think). And I couldn't help associating them with the use of water beds to relieve irritations in burn patients or to avoid bedsores in the elderly. Suddenly I knew – there was my story: somewhere between those two extremes, in the space between the water bed in which a young woman launches herself into life and the one where she ends it. The next step was to find the "breathing" of the story, the tone that would define it. At this stage of my life as a writer, I keep doing drafts through trial and error, but generally these drafts don't leave my head. And so, by the time I began to write, I had already found the exact rhythm of the phrase, which is fundamental to this story. And it worked!

*About the Translation
by Andrea Labinger*

Ani Shua's exquisite story, so perfect in its metonymy, begged me to translate it, and I couldn't refuse. The stream-of-consciousness prose, as seamless and, paradoxically, as entangled as its topic, a woman's life, wasn't easy to capture, though. Everything Ani writes is tinged (sometimes more than tinged) with humor and

a certain essentiality, but in this piece an unmistakable lyricism is added to the mix. The Spanish language lends itself to long, flowing cadences, much more so than English, it seems to me. I wanted to preserve the tenderness without losing the edge. Only once in the course of doing this translation did a felicitous linguistic accident make me feel like the English vehicle presented an advantage: the rendering of “odio y calor” as “hate and heat.” Beyond that, I think the piece speaks for itself.

Then she walked resolutely, determined but timid, as those days demanded, with a sort of controlled boldness, right into his apartment, and he led her into the bedroom without deliberation, better not to give her time to change her mind, to think of obstacles, her voice becoming a barrier, better to leave it to the silence of their bodies, there, in the bedroom, that damned, haughty, brutal waterbed, one of the first in the country, the pride of its owner, inflated, definitive, forbidden, they fell upon it, and as they undressed with the awkward, irrevocable intensity of the first time, she learned, little by little, to mount it, to keep her balance on it, a waterbed requires taming, demands the skill of an accomplished rider, but afterward what bliss, what harmony, what interplay of waves and fluids, and how she learned to enjoy it, that crazy bed, while he learned everything there was to know about her, odors, hairs, that never-routine joining of tongues, and one day, so comfortable they fell asleep together, only to awaken practically on the floor, drenched, surrounded by a lake, laughing, touching, bailing out the water, swearing at the damned punctured plastic, naked, sweeping the water away with driers and buckets and rags and games and the downstairs neighbor complaining about the damp ceiling, their hyperbolic love liquids filtering into the neighbor’s apartment, triggering complaints from the other tenants, and they laughed and drained, pursuing the water, pursuing each other. But later it wasn’t all games between them anymore, and their caresses went beyond their skin, they caressed each other’s lungs and pancreases, it wasn’t just their mouths loving anymore, it was their tonsils and their souls, and separation hurt after so much love, and then she began sleeping over more and more often, and the waves became less amusing, pleasant, as wild as ever but not so divine, every time one of them moved in his sleep, the waves rocked the other one, their sleep was fitful, problematic, waking to a punctured mattress and morning obligations was irritating, they wanted to bail out the water and laugh and wring the rags like before, but it was a weekday with schedules, and the world was out there, demanding its due, they cleaned and dried

and decided to buy a real bed, maybe get married, but not in church, an inexpensive foam rubber mattress. And then the country itself was shaken by a waterbed which became a tidal wave, a tide that threatened to swallow them up, there were persecutions, official and unofficial, someone might come looking for them, it was time to change location, change houses, it wasn't easy to find anyone willing to take them in, one night they picked up the new foam rubber mattress, carrying it somehow between the two of them down patrolled streets, carrying a bed could be a sign of disturbing the peace, of danger, of subversion, a sign of death. For a few days they slept badly in the borrowed, shared house, making furtive, forbidden love, like adolescents hiding from their parents, until they had their passports ready. It was in Paris that they set up the other bed, a little Paris apartment with a tiny bathroom and an impossible bed, a sunken-in, broken-down *sommier* and so little money that finally they thought of turning it upside down, legs up, mattress lodged between the legs, army blankets from the flea market, so threadbare and moth-eaten, and their good Argentine winter coats protecting them from the relentless, boring, long, sad Paris winter, and after a while the certainty that it wasn't there that they wanted to have their child, not in that city or in that bed. Then the return, they went back to that foam rubber mattress that hadn't been sold, nearly new, and there, in their forever city, her belly grew so large, she seemed so fragile and yet so tremendous, so regal, all-encompassing, dominant, that he got used to sleeping curled up in a ball, he got used to making himself smaller, occupying minimal space, a wise habit because before long there would be three of them in that bed, they brought the baby in with them just to nurse but soon all three of them slept there and as soon as she began to walk, those little steps invading at dawn, flip-flop, mother protesting, father hugging, sleeping on his side, lying almost on the bed frame, the tiny, spread-eagled princess happy in the middle of the bed, then they had others, each one in turn figuring out how to occupy the middle of the bed, sleeping meant sharing new smells, of diapers, urine, baby poop, fresh milk, sweat and spit-up, but eventually they also learned that children come and go away,

and at last none of them remained. And it should be recognized that at this point they also knew other beds, round ones with canopies, all of them short-sheeted, the violent perfumes of some wayside hotel, other he's for her and other she's for him, and yet they always slept together. They made more money and they moved and they wanted something both of them had dreamed of: a *sommier* like the one in Paris but brand new, with the softest, most comfortable mattress in the world, on top of the *sommier* a mattress with some small springs and other, larger ones, that was their dream and it was fulfilled and for a few years they slept semi-submerged, their still-young bones adjusting to their relative weights, and yet, as the years passed, their pancreases lungs tonsils that had loved each other so and still did, in a way, started wearing out and their back problems began. They gave up the inner-spring mattress, went back to a foam rubber mattress that looked nothing like that first one, it was thicker and, above all, much harder, as hard as some of the woolen mattresses of their respective childhoods, the ones that had to be carded from time to time. But even all that hardness wasn't enough, soon they surrendered, first the *sommier*, then came the bed board under the mattress, backaches, nights were long then, complicated. They no longer slept as they had in their adolescence, nor with the deep desperation of those dreams their children had disturbed, both of them got up, moved around, began waking earlier, at midnight their bladders cried out, urinating became part of the passage of the hours. They struggled mutely now, two individuals of substance, of weight, of a certain age, they fought for vital space, a silent combat, the bed their boxing ring. Every night when they went to bed, they divided the battlefield, prepared their weapons, equitably distributed pillows and blankets, a little more on the side of the one who pulled less, a section of the quilt tucked under the mattress to defend their battle positions. Then he began to talk about separate beds, they visited ordinary furniture stores, maybe two beds, they visited sophisticated furniture stores, connected beds but also separable, with a motor, a little expensive, when suddenly she became gravely ill, and a long hospital stay took her from their bed, he had it to himself all night

long and didn't enjoy it, he missed the shoves and elbow pokes, the abrupt movements of sleep, the inconsiderate, brutal way she would plop down again on the mattress, he missed it all, he missed the annoying, embarrassing smells of an aging woman, the touch of loose, slightly saggy flesh, the skin that was no longer so tense in their embraces but still so very hers, their bodies competing and touching, giving each other hate and heat in that bed: he missed it. And so, when she came home, they stopped talking about separate beds, although after a brief cease-fire the nightly combat and annoyance returned, he suffered from acid reflux and the doctor recommended sleeping with his head elevated. Then they discussed whether to saw off the front legs, decided to add supports to elevate the back ones, it would also help his breathing, reducing sleep apnea and snoring, their nights were a concert now, worse if he had a slight cold, sometimes she awoke in the darkness feeling like she was in the middle of a storm, deep, tangled winds, his breathing in her ear, exquisite, desired, and now unbearable: they were old. One night the intolerable noise awoke her again, his deep exhalation, long and practically stentorian but then what a relief silence brought, she could recapture her sweetest sleep, the profound sleep of early morning and she awoke with the strange sensation of absence, something was incomplete, the exasperating sound of air intake was missing, this time there had been no inhalation, and beginning the very next night she was the ruler of the entire bedspace at last, the solitary victor. And so it continued for years, slow, laborious years like those of childhood, her mind growing distant, foggy, only momentarily parting the clouds, the doctor's words that day, near the end, advising, talking to her children at her bedside, in order to avoid those reddish areas that tend to blister, form wounds, bedsores, that voice firmly advising: we'll have to put her in a waterbed.