

*Commentary and translation by Enrica J. Ardemagni*

José Castro Urioste has a unique style of writing and one that creates challenges for a translator. When translating his novel *Y tú, ¿qué has hecho?* (Ediciones Nuevo Espacio 2001), I immediately confronted the world of children and run-on, incoherent sentences that captured memories recorded only in the mind. Trying to transfer this speech into English required a twofold approach, keeping the innocent recollections of childhood as now being told by an adult and maintaining sentences that would not lose the reader. In some of the longer sentences I eventually found a spirit of the original that could be carried into English. When starting the translation of a two-page short story, I was prepared to use the translation strategies that I had with Castro Urioste's previous dialogue, only to be confronted by a completely different self-dialogue. The long, run-on sentences were present, but the story was written in the second-person familiar you or "tú" form in Spanish. While all translation requires a close reading and an encounter with cross-cultural and cross-linguistic possibilities found in the source text, recasting this story took me to the somewhat superstitious and fantasy world of spells and their potential outcomes. The symmetries in the work jumped out when I saw the water *motif*, first found as drops running down the nasturtium, and then changing to the water used to cast a spell. A new translation strategy had to move from descriptions to express in English a shift to the emotions shown by the girl and the man. The translation had to speed up as quickly as the actions of the protagonist and the man she has bewitched. As the story reads quickly in Spanish with what seems like a speed that reflects lives that are out of control, the English had to transfer that speed to the reader. First a girl who fantasizes over a man, in a slow, descriptive daily activity, shifts to the fast pace of a man who tries to escape the spell, and then again to the girl who wants to break that spell. Bewitched, which one is it? Is it the girl who captures the man she

wants, or the man who is spellbound? Although many twentieth-century Latin American writers incorporate the world of witchcraft and spells into their writing, this story made it believable. The man was bewitched, but the synonym spellbound applies to both the “tú” protagonist and the man upon whom she uses the spell: both are “bound” with no sign of relief. My translation strategy had to be clear but maintain the ambiguous outcome of the culturally coded narrative. It was not the spell that I had to make believable, but rather the effects of two lives that speed as fast as the language in which the story is written.

You moved along the second-floor handrail of your building and leaned against it, close to a flowerpot where water drops trickled down the nasturtium leaves and you anticipated the time (Mondays at nine, Tuesdays at eight, on Wednesdays he didn't come, Thursdays at nine also, Fridays at ten) when you could watch him pass by with his hair still damp, trimmed mustache, dark briefcase and immediately you searched for his eyes that followed no other course than the cold morning air, and you waited, you waited and continued hoping that one day he would look at the reddish nasturtium that adorned the second-floor handrail and then it would be easy, yes, it would be easy for him to glance sideways a few inches and mistake your face for the only flower that still survived the winter. And when it happened and you felt his gaze you turned as red as the petals on the nasturtium that surrounded you and you turned even redder when you smiled at him and redder yet when you closed your eyes and then reopened them able to believe that on that morning his eyes had veered from the cold air in front of him. You thought he was a professor and you almost told him so three days later when you ran into each other close to the Economics Building and he said Hello to you. And you, Good morning, almost a Good morning professor, and you couldn't believe he was there, really there, asking you if you were in a hurry and although you were, yes, you were extremely hurried but you didn't fess up, that Monday you didn't admit that you were running so late you thought the only thing you would see were the water drops that swam across the nasturtium leaves, but he told you that his professor had canceled his first morning class, so you thought no, that he was a student also and then he asked you if you had a few minutes to have a cup of coffee. A coffee? You repeated it to confirm what seemed impossible to be hearing. Yes, he was a student, but in his last semester of civil engineering, yes, he worked for a construction company, he was writing his senior thesis, his thesis already. He invited you to go to the movies that weekend and you accepted, and after pizza and wine you accepted a stroll through the damp streets, you also accepted the

hand that you braided, occasionally you accepted to share some yellowing sheets at a small hotel on Puno Street. However, you always rejected the names of women that you found in his calendar, including that of a Math professor, which, according to the university grapevine, explained his above average grade. And you hated those ghosts, the gossip that traveled through the air parking itself in the ears of students and professors. Then you wanted to prove that when you entwined your fingers with his you held a hand that only held yours and no other, but suddenly you didn't see him one Saturday nor the following either and he disappeared from the city like the sunset.

It was an odd fluke when you overheard your godmother, without realizing that you were behind her, tell your divorced aunt that the best way to land a man and to keep him secure, guaranteed trustworthy, was to mix the water that springs from your skin into a cup of strong coffee. It seemed like the craziest thing you had ever heard of but that weekend he disappeared again without a trace or a warning and you spent those two days turning over in your mind the twenty thousand possible places he might be and the twenty thousand possible women, including the Math professor, who could be keeping him company. Nor could you let it go, you did not want to leave him and be alone again with nothing but the nasturtium bathed in dirty drops of morning water. Then you remembered the crazy thing your godmother said and one afternoon you invited him to your house and you served him a cup of strong coffee that he drank sip by sip and then afterwards put aside to drink from you. That afternoon his passion continued until he was worn out and the gossip about him that spread through the hallways no longer mattered to you because on Saturdays and Sundays he belonged only to you, because you knew that it was your hand and only yours that lay next to his. But you never imagined that one morning while you waited for him on the second-floor handrail of your building he would arrive with uncombed hair, unshaven, and that he would tell you that he didn't feel like going to class and he preferred staying with you. That morning repeated itself so many times that you stopped going

to the second-floor handrail so that he wouldn't see you. Later you saw how his thesis had not progressed past page fifty-four and several stacks of forgotten books were left unread and you also saw that in his last semester at the university he failed almost all of his classes. At one point he told you that he no longer worked because he had resigned but you found a dismissal letter torn into pieces in his bedroom. But he kept looking for you and chasing after you telling you that you were the only thing that he had, inviting you here and there, and you telling him that it was better to do things later because you needed to study. And he insisted again, returning to the second floor of your building, he returned to your house begging you for another cup of coffee and when you didn't open the door he pounded and pounded until your ears could no longer tolerate the sound on the wood and you opened the door for him and you found him standing there without realizing that his knuckles were torn to shreds. Then you told him that it might be wise to take a short break from each other, not for long, just a couple of weeks, maybe a month, because it would be better for both of you, but he wouldn't agree, no, he didn't agree, he would never accept that, and he told you he had lost everything only to be with you and he didn't plan on ever leaving you, no, he would not leave you and that you had better not think about that either because he didn't understand what the hell happened but he felt bewitched and he couldn't survive a minute without you, a second without you, and you told him that it couldn't go on like this and he thought you were betraying his loyalty and he shook you by the shoulders because he had lost everything, everything, and suddenly you felt a blow that split your lip because he could only believe that you had betrayed him but he begged you to forgive him, a thousand pardons for having hit you but for you everything was over while he kept insisting, shaking your shoulders, insisting, you told him that it was already over, it was all over, while he insisted that he couldn't be without you because he couldn't free himself from that spell and you only wanting to hear your godmother tell you how to undo the spell but her voice is nowhere to be heard.