



To cite this article:

Simpkins, Kirsty. "A Translation of Juan Cárdenas' *Diablo de las Provincias*." *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 16 (December 2021): 143-154.

aalitra.org.au

Australian Association for Literary Translation

A Translation of Juan Cárdenas' *Diablo de las Provincias*

KIRSTY SIMPKINS

El Diablo de las Provincias is a 180-page novel written by the Colombian author Juan Cárdenas. It tells the tale of a biologist who reluctantly returns to his home country, Colombia, after an unsuccessful attempt at life abroad. He finds himself in a crucible of political, religious and industrial tensions. The novel was published by Spanish publishing house Periférica in 2017 as part of their *Largo Recorrido* series, which celebrates “clásicos recientes” [recent classics] and, in 2019, the novel was awarded the *Premio de Narrativa José María Arguedas* by Casa de las Américas.

The novel's setting is referred to as the “dwarf city” and the protagonist's name is never revealed. He is referred to as simply “the biologist”; other characters are also referenced by generic terms denoting their profession, relationship to the protagonist, or other defining features. “His mother,” “the drug dealer,” “the girl with the protruding belly”. This suggests that the events in the novel are representative of events that could occur in any place, to anyone. Similarly, the biologist finds his hometown has at once changed dramatically and not changed at all; there is a distinct feeling of being stuck in time. Cárdenas achieves this sense of timelessness through scarce reference to modern technology, and the town is described as “backwards”, and “conservative”. I have used lexis from across a spectrum of register to create a sense of not knowing when the novel is set; opting for phrases such as “affected form of address”, “rejoice” and “somewhat”, which appear slightly antiquated and formal in contrast with colloquial phrases such as “it all went to shit”.

The novel's subtitle “Fable in Miniatures” refers to its episodic format. The biologist is subject to conversations, encounters and events which are relayed in a straightforward manner, using subjective third-person narrative. However, the events are often unusual and imply a sense of unease. His brother's death, the birth of a child, an encounter with his drug-dealer, a reunion with his ex-girlfriend and a visit to his childhood home are all laced with a strange and uncomfortable undertone. The novel demands active participation from its reader, who must work to find meaning in these seemingly allegorical happenings. This is also because the narrator, the biologist, is characterised as a passive observer, at times unreliable, which is represented symbolically as he often witnesses events through a window, from behind a fence, inebriated, smoking a joint or in a dream. His experiences often leave him ruminating, confused and disturbed. Eventually, he rejects his own moral code and accepts a position to work for an industrial sugar cane plantation. Only then do things fall into place for him, and he can prosper in his hometown, representing the bleak reality conforming to corrupt systems is often the easier choice. This subverts the fable genre, which is expected to teach a moral lesson.

To communicate the biologist's passivity, the reflexive verb form is used frequently in the source text. In the translation, this is achieved by using the reflexive pronoun “himself”. For example, the phrase, “se vio arrastrado” [he saw himself dragged] is translated as “he found himself being dragged along”. To communicate the fact that he does not always see the full picture and to reinforce the sense of doubt, I have used lexis “somewhat”, “quite”, and “rather” to hedge the biologist's observations.

Considering its function, the source text can primarily be categorised as expressive due to its stylistic features and distinct narrative voice; it is “artistically organised” (Reiss 163). However,

the intertextuality, philosophical references and thought-provoking issues that are dealt with, prompt the reader to consider complex contemporary issues; for this reason, the text can also be categorised as operative. Thirdly, the novel also fulfils an informative function, as it provides information surrounding rural life and social structures in Colombia.

As Reiss states, “if the SL text is written in order to convey artistic contents, then the contents in the TL should be conveyed in an analogously artistic organisation” (167). Thus, the principal aim in my translation was to retain source text’s expressive features: particularly its intense imagery and figurative language. Where appropriate, I have used the same images in the target text with the aim of communicating similar connotations to the target reader; this can be seen in “sclerosis of their small city” and “like an old olive in vinegar”. These images are unusual and stylistic in the source text; in order to achieve a similar effect on the target reader as that of the original image on the source-text reader, they must be retained.

Where an image has not read fluently in the translation, I have adapted it accordingly. In chapter 3, the biologist, while smoking a joint, thinks back to memories of the life he left behind and envisions these memories as live images. “Podía ver cómo caía sobre el pasto húmedo el revoltijo de cosas todavía palpitantes y empapadas, recién molidas” [he could see how, on the humid grass, the mess of things still palpitating and drenched, recently ground-up, were falling] becomes, “he could see how tangled knots of palpitating images, raw and freshly ground together, began to fall upon the damp lawn”. Where “revoltijo” is euphonic in the source text, the English options “mess of stuff” or “jumble of things” sound clumsy. “Tangled knots” makes the implicit explicit as “revoltijo” has connotations of something being tangled or chaotic. Opting for “raw” instead of “drenched” is in keeping with the imagery of flesh that I interpreted upon my first reading of the source text; it also highlights a second denotation of “revoltijo”, as the term can also be used to refer to the intestines of a butchered animal. Semantically, “raw” works well alongside “ground together”, which results in an extended and idiomatic metaphor of flesh and meat. As slightly grotesque and uncomfortable images, they also mirror the overall atmosphere created throughout the whole of the source text.

A further challenge presented in the translation of this text was reference to the dialect typical of certain rural areas in Antioquia and El Valle del Cauca, where the novel is set. This dialect carries connotations of being from a rural, lower-class background and being less educated. The narration is as follows.

Así se habían hablado siempre, sin recurrir al melifluo tuteo con el que algunos paisanos intentaban disimular ante los demás el trato de vos, la sorna cómplice, las consonantes aspiradas, el dialecto machetero del sur que el biólogo, a pesar de los años de exilio voluntario, no había perdido del todo”. [They had talked that way always, without resorting to the mellifluous use of tú with which some people from that area tried to conceal in front of others their use of vos, the complicit sarcasm, the aspirated consonants, the sloppy dialect of the south which the biologist, in spite of his years in voluntary exile, had not lost completely].

The first challenge was the translation of “tú” [you] and “vos” [you]. Use of the latter, an antiquated form of address, is typically used in Cauca and the surrounding areas. It is said to have been preserved in these areas as they were historically self-sufficient, geographically difficult to reach and therefore less exposed to the use of “tú”, which had become more popular in Spain during the eighteenth century and spread to South America (Collazos 4). During this time, the use of “vos”

became more stigmatised, reserved for the ignorant and less gentrified. With no English equivalent, I opted for a general translation while aiming to communicate the social significance of this aspect of dialogue. This is achieved by translating “use of tú” as “the more affected form of address used by some townsfolk”. Use of the adjective “affected” suggests that the biologist’s dialect is seen as less desirable in comparison to the form of address adopted by others. Secondly, I translated “dialecto machetero del sur” as “typical southern accent”. “Machetero” in this context means “lazy” or “sloppy”, which could be demeaning to speakers of that dialect. “Typical” is a more neutral adjective that works well for the purposes of this translation. As Mona Baker suggests, how one chooses to “render the speech of a character in the source text... is potentially an ethical choice” (322).

The novel presents us with an uncomfortable narrator, some uncomfortable scenes and some uncomfortable truths. In this translation of the first three chapters, my aim has been to capture that discomfort and transmit the original text’s sense of unease.

Bibliography

Baker, Mona. *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*. Routledge, 2018.

Collazos, Ana María Díaz. *Sociolinguistic Development of Voseo in the Andean Region of Colombia*. De Gruyter, Inc., 2015.

Reiss, Katharina. “Type, Kind and Individuality of Text: Decision Making in Translation.” *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti, Routledge, 2004, pp. 160 -171.

El Diablo De Las Provincias

Devil in The Province A Fable in Miniatures

Translated by Kirsty Simpkins

1

Cuando peor pintaban las cosas le salió el reemplazo en el internado de señoritas. La rectora del instituto de educación normal le explicó que la profesora titular tenía un permiso de maternidad y por eso lo habían buscado con cierta urgencia. Echó cuentas: pagaban mal, eran muchas horas, pero a esas alturas no tenía nada mejor. Estaba recién llegado, después de vivir quince años por fuera del país, y le habían bastado unas pocas semanas en el sofá de la casa de un amigo, en el centro de la capital, para darse cuenta de que sus títulos extranjeros no le garantizarían una plaza en ninguna universidad de primer nivel. Las personas como él, con las mismas o mejores credenciales, se habían vuelto una mercancía vulgar. Entonces resolvió que lo mejor sería rebajar las expectativas, probar suerte en la universidad departamental y pasar una temporada en la casa de su madre. Compró el tiquete de avión más barato que encontró y se despidió de su amigo, el único que le quedaba en la capital, uno de los pocos que le quedaban en el mundo. Se conocían desde la infancia, cuando ambos soñaban con escapar de la esclerosis de su pequeña ciudad imaginando países remotos. Su amigo le preguntó si de veras le parecía buena idea. Mirá que es una pesadilla, le dijo, pensáelo bien. Aquí te podés quedar todo el tiempo que haga falta. El biólogo se encogió de hombros y sonrió para que el otro entendiera que la ciudad chica, el casipueblo, ese lugar conservador y atrasado del que tanto se burlaban para conjurar el estigma de haber nacido allí, finalmente se las había ingeniado para devolverles el chiste. Vuelvo con el rabo entre las piernas, dijo el biólogo, bufo y solemne, me entrego a mi destino, y su amigo se rio con su risa de animal asustado.

1

Just when things were looking really bleak, he got the temporary post at the girls' boarding school. The current teacher was going on maternity leave, the headmistress explained, so they needed him somewhat urgently. He weighed it up: the pay was poor and the hours were long, but at that point there were no better options on the table. He had arrived in the capital after fifteen years out of Colombia, and a few weeks on his friend's sofa in the city centre had been quite enough to convince him that his foreign qualifications wouldn't secure him a position in any top university. Nowadays, people with his credentials, or even better, weren't hard to come by. So, he thought he'd better lower his expectations, try his luck at the university back in his district and spend a stint at his mother's house. He bought the cheapest plane ticket he could find and said farewell to his friend, the only one he had left in the capital, one of the few he had left in the world. They had met as children, each of them plotting their grand escape from the sclerosis of their small city, conjuring up images of far-off lands. His friend asked him if he was sure it was a good idea. Listen, that place is unbearable, he said, think it over. You can stay here as long as you like. The biologist shrugged and smiled to show his friend that the tiny city, the almost-town, that backward and conservative place that they so often used to mock in order to exorcise the stigma of having been born there, had finally come up with a way to turn the joke on them. I'm going back with my tail between my legs, said the biologist, both solemn and satirical, I'm surrendering to fate, and his friend let out a laugh not unlike that of a frightened animal.

No quedaba de otra. Tocaba aprender a respirar por la herida y sonreír sin desprecio, incluso con cierta gratitud, celebrando que el sentido de humor provincial se hubiera revelado al mismo tiempo como una pequeña doctrina determinista. Cuidate mucho saludame a tu mamá, le dijo su amigo, con el acento de allá. Así se habían hablado siempre, sin recurrir al melifluo tuteo con el que algunos paisanos intentaban disimular ante los demás el trato de vos, la sorna cómplice, las consonantes aspiradas, el dialecto machetero del sur que el biólogo, a pesar de los años de exilio voluntario, no había perdido del todo.

A la semana de estar viviendo en la casa de su mamá lo llamaron del internado. Una voz histriónica le dijo que alguien de confianza les había pasado las señas y el biólogo se quedó pensando quién sería el inesperado benefactor. Le tuvieron que repetir dos veces toda la información, no tanto porque no hubiera escuchado sino porque no acababa de asimilar lo que sería su vida cotidiana, al menos por un tiempo: haría un reemplazo en las materias de biología y ecología en cuatro cursos de un internado para señoritas, a las afueras de la ciudad enana.

Un par de días después, mientras iba por la carretera en un destartado Mazda 323 y el sol de la mañana mostraba de a pocos la ondulación de los cafetales, el azul de la cordillera, se llenó de entusiasmo y tuvo por primera vez la impresión de que, después de todo, podría vivir allí de nuevo y acostumbrarse. Me adapto, pensó, sonriéndose por utilizar esa palabra. Pero casi de inmediato se puso a la defensiva: este paisaje es mentiroso como un diablo.

2

El colegio tenía tres edificios, uno muy grande de tres plantas con un patio de cemento, otro más pequeño donde estaban los dormitorios de

He had no choice. He must learn to grin and bear it, be grateful in fact, rejoice in the provincial sense of humour, which had just revealed itself as a minor deterministic doctrine. Look after yourself and say hello to your mum for me, said his friend, with his old familiar accent from back there. They'd always talked like that, not resorting to the more affected form of address used by some townfolk to help them conceal their typical southern dialect, the complicit sarcasm and inhaled consonants, which the biologist, in spite of his years in voluntary exile, hadn't lost completely.

He'd been living at his mother's house for a week when he received the call from the boarding school. A histrionic voice informed him that a trustworthy source had passed on his details and the biologist was left wondering who the mysterious benefactor might be. They had to repeat the information twice, not so much because he wasn't listening but because he couldn't quite picture what daily life would now look like, at least for a while: he would be the substitute teacher for biology and ecology, giving four classes at a boarding school for girls, on the outskirts of the dwarf city.

A couple of days later, as he drove along the road in a beaten-up Mazda 323 and the morning sun began to shed light on the rolling hills of coffee plantations, in the cerulean haze of the mountain range, he was filled with enthusiasm and for the first time he got the feeling that perhaps, after all, he could live here again and get used to it. I can adapt, he thought, smiling to himself at his use of the word. But he caught himself almost immediately: this perfidious paradise is work of the devil.

2

The boarding school had three buildings, a large one with three floors and a cement patio, a smaller one where the girls' dormitories

las chicas y la capilla. Todo estaba pintado de un color azul verdoso que brillaba con la humedad permanente de ese paraje montañoso y templado. Mientras esperaba a la rectora en un corredor externo, el biólogo se quedó mirando un nicho con forma de concha marina que albergaba una figura de la Virgen. Era una estatua humilde, hecha de yeso, que no parecía despertar el fervor de nadie, abandonada a su suerte en medio de la pared, donde a duras penas cumplía con una dudosa tarea decorativa. El biólogo no tuvo tiempo de preguntarse por las razones de semejante desamparo porque en ese instante salió la rectora y le pidió que entrara a su despacho. A quemarropa le soltó lo de la baja de maternidad de la profesora titular. Es temporal, le advirtió. Tampoco dio muchas vueltas para hablarle del dinero y la carga horaria. Parecía una mujer resuelta, sin tiempo que perder, tanto así que el biólogo se vio arrastrado por su entusiasmo ejecutivo y dijo que sí a todo como si se estuviera incorporando a una empresa colonial o a una expedición científica.

Le asignaron una mesa en la sala de profesores. No la que le había correspondido como reemplazante de la maestra titular – esa se la había quedado una jovencita que dictaba matemáticas – sino una muy pequeña, frente a la ventana desde la cual se veían la cancha de básquet, un huerto y una alambrada que lindaba con un potrero donde pastaban unas vacas.

Los primeros días fueron apacibles, tal como había imaginado. Las alumnas se portaban muy bien, a pesar de que no mostraban mucho interés por lo que él trataba de enseñarles. Todas iban impecables, con su uniforme bien planchado y los peinados reglamentarios, que eran tres: el pelo suelto, la cola de caballo y cepillado hacia atrás, sujeto con una discreta diadema. De ningún modo podían llevarlo muy corto, pintado de colores, cardado, con rayitos ni nada que pudiera llamar la atención.

were, and a chapel. Everything was painted turquoise blue and glistened with the permanent humidity that lingered over that temperate, mountainous place, separating it from the rest of the world. As he waited for the headmistress in an outer corridor, the biologist studied a shell-shaped niche in the wall, which housed a figure of the Virgin Mary. It was a humble statue, made of plaster, unlikely to awaken religious fervour in anybody at all, left there in the middle of a wall, where she barely fulfilled her role as a dubious decoration. The biologist didn't have time to contemplate her state of neglect because, at that instant, the headmistress appeared and asked him to enter her office. She got straight to expressing her views on the unforeseen maternity leave. It's temporary, she warned. And she was upfront about both the salary and his overloaded timetable. She seemed like a resolute woman, without time to waste, so much so that the biologist found himself being dragged along by her executive enthusiasm, saying yes to everything as though he were joining a colonial corporation or scientific expedition.

He was assigned a desk in the staffroom. Not the one belonging to the usual biology teacher – a young mathematics teacher had taken that for herself – but a much smaller one, beside a window that overlooked a basketball court, an allotment and a wire fence surrounding a meadow where cows were grazing.

The first days were unremarkable, as he'd imagined. The girls were well behaved, despite showing scarce interest for anything he tried to teach them. They were all impeccable, with well-ironed uniforms and one of three regulation hair styles: down, ponytail, or brushed back with a discrete clip. By no means could they wear it short, dyed, backcombed or with highlights of any kind. Anything eye-catching was strictly prohibited.

Las alumnas provenían en su mayoría de los pueblos del sur del departamento, aunque había también algunas jovencitas negras de la Costa Pacífica, seguramente hijas de funcionarios públicos o de profesores de la región a los que se les concedían becas o tarifas reducidas. Las de la ciudad enana eran solo diez y la mitad estaban en embarazo.

Una de estas chicas, que mostraba una barriga puntuda bajo el suéter holgado del uniforme, lo interrumpió durante una clase en la que se hablaba sobre Darwin y la Teoría de la Evolución. Le preguntó si Dios había hecho que cada animal y cada planta tuvieran una tarea propia. Y el biólogo, incapaz de interpretar el repentino interés de la muchachita, pero igualmente emocionado por la posibilidad de enseñarle algo, se lanzó a explicar que no necesariamente, que así como había algunos rasgos desarrollados con un fin específico, también se presentaban muchos casos en los que la evolución parecía ir en contra de toda razón, de todo diseño. Digamos que la naturaleza no deja de inventar cosas, pero buena parte de lo que inventa es inútil durante milenios y no es raro que una adaptación se atrofie o, al revés, que cambie de utilidad. El aguacate es un ejemplo muy bonito. Las plantas empezaron a desarrollar ese fruto tan delicioso para que fuera consumido por unos grandes mamíferos llamados gomfoterios, muy parecidos a los elefantes, que vivían en los bosques de Centroamérica. Para casi cualquier animal contemporáneo habría sido imposible digerir un fruto con una pepa tan grande, pero no para los gomfoterios, que tenían un tracto digestivo enorme y así podían dispersar las semillas. Jugada maestra del aguacate, dirán ustedes, pero la cosa es que los gomfoterios se extinguieron hace poco menos de dos millones de años y entretanto los aguacates siguieron existiendo sin ninguna variación importante. Es como si los aguacates no se hubieran dado cuenta de que los gomfoterios dejaron de existir

Most of the students came from towns to the south of the district, although there were some black girls from the Pacific Coast, undoubtedly daughters of civil servants or local teachers, to whom they gave grants or reduced rates. Only ten pupils came from the dwarf city and half of them were pregnant.

One of the ten, whose belly protruded from underneath her oversized school jumper, interrupted him during a class about Darwin and the Theory of Evolution. She asked him if God had given each animal and plant its own role to play. And the biologist, incapable of processing the young lady's sudden interest, but equally excited by the opportunity to teach her something, launched into an explanation that no, not necessarily, that just as there were some characteristics developed for a specific purpose, there were also many cases in which evolution appeared to go against all reason, all conceivable design. Let's say that nature never stops creating things, but a good part of what it creates isn't useful for millennia, and it's not unusual for an adaptation to atrophy or, on the contrary, change purpose. How about the avocado. The avocado is a lovely example. Plants began to produce this delicious fruit for it to be eaten by large mammals called gomphotheres, very similar to elephants, that lived in the forests of Central America. At the time, it would have been impossible for any animal to digest a fruit with such a large seed, but not for the gomphothere, which had an enormous digestive tract and that's how avocados dispersed their seeds. A stroke of genius by the avocado, you might say, but the thing is that gomphotheres became extinct just less than two million years ago and, in the meantime, avocados have remained in existence without any significant variation. It's as though avocados didn't realise that gomphotheres had ceased to exist so many years before and they believed their evolutionary strategy was still working, when in reality everything changed without them

hace tanto tiempo y creyeran que su estrategia evolutiva todavía sirve, cuando lo cierto es que todo cambió y ellos no se dan por enterados, los aguacates viven su vida pendientes de una fantasma...

El biólogo paró en seco porque ahora la jovencita de la barriga puntuda lo miraba como se mira a los locos. Gracias por la pregunta, dijo, antes de seguir con la lección del libro de texto. En un momento se dio vuelta para escribir algo en la pizarra y oyó una vocecita jocosa que decía: ¿y entonces los aguacates de páramo eran para unos elefantes chiquitos? Hubo algunas risas, nada de qué preocuparse. La clase volvió a la normalidad y pudo terminar de dar la lección sin que nadie volviera a interrumpirlo.

El chascarrillo se refería a unos aguacates diminutos, del tamaño de una ciruela, que se dan silvestres en ecosistemas de alta montaña. Quizás la pregunta era relevante, pensó el biólogo, sonriendo para adentro. Sentado a su mesita de la sala de profesores, con la mirada perdida en la cancha de básquet vacía, fantaseó con encontrar los restos fosilizados de un elefantito del tamaño de una caja de zapatos.

3

Después del trabajo acompañó a su madre al supermercado. Llenaron de bolsas el baúl del Mazda y de regreso a casa hablaron de lo mucho que había crecido la ciudad enana, de la cantidad de edificios y conjuntos residenciales que se estaban construyendo, del evidente progreso que su madre veía demostrado matemáticamente en el hecho de que ahora había dos grandes centros comerciales, siempre repletos de clientes. Dos, repitió ella con los dedos en forma de antena, y van a hacer otro en la salida norte. Luego, señalando unas torres de apartamentos recién levantadas a un costado de la autopista, le aseguró a su hijo que las cosas habían mejorado mucho. Esto ya despegó, dijo y el biólogo asintió sin mucha

even noticing, avocados live their life in service of a ghost...

The biologist stopped short because the young lady with the protruding belly was looking at him as if he were mad. Thank you for the question, he said, before returning to the textbook lesson. A moment later he turned to write something on the board and heard a witty little voice say, and what about paramo avocados? Were they for a species of tiny, baby elephant? There was some laughter, nothing to cause concern. The class returned to normal and he was able to finish the lesson without further interruption.

The joke was referring to a type of minute avocado, the size of a plum, that grows wild in high mountain ecosystems. Maybe the question was relevant, the biologist thought, smiling to himself. Sat at his small desk in the staffroom, with his gaze lost in the empty basketball court, he fantasised about discovering the fossilised remains of an elephant the size of a shoebox.

3

After work, he went with his mother to the supermarket. They filled the Mazda with bags and on the way home they talked about just how much the dwarf city had grown, about the number of buildings and residential complexes that were being built, about the clear progress that his mother could see, mathematically shown in the fact that there were now two large shopping centres, always bursting with customers. Two, she repeated, forming antennae with her fingers, and they're going to build another one by the north exit. Then, pointing at some recently constructed tower blocks to one side of the motorway, she assured her son that things really had improved. It's really taken off, she said and the biologist

convicción, aunque secretamente reconocía la prosperidad de su madre. No por nada había conseguido mudarse a una urbanización de casas nuevas en una zona de gente acomodada, por los lados del Batallón, justo detrás de la pista del aeropuerto, donde por suerte no aterrizaban más que dos vuelos diarios y alguna avioneta de las que iban a la Costa Pacífica. Al biólogo le parecía que la casa nueva era incómoda en comparación con la antigua casa del centro. El diseño obedecía a la aplicación boba y maquinal de unas modas que se estaban propagando como una plaga por toda la ciudad. Y eso lo hizo pensar en el lugar común de que las formas tendían a replicarse en la naturaleza con igual desenfreno pero con mucho más acierto estético que en las obras humanas. El caso es que no había un solo espacio en toda la casa nueva que el biólogo encontrara acogedor, ningún nicho que propiciara cualquier actividad enriquecedora para el espíritu. La sala, las habitaciones, nada invitaba permanecer mucho tiempo, como si la casa estuviera compuesta exclusivamente por pasillos y escaleras y el biólogo no pudiera hacer otra cosa que deambular de un lado a otro, subir y bajar, entrar y salir, abrir y cerrar la puerta de la nevera, a veces acurrucarse delante de la televisión. Actividades puras, pensaba él, vaciadas de todo significado, que, por otro lado, eran una consecuencia más de su renovada condición de hijo. Algunas noches, cuando su mamá ya se había acostado, el biólogo salía al jardín a oler el fresco y fumarse un porro sentado en una mecedora vieja. Era el único momento de sosiego que tenía en esa casa, cuando algo dentro de él se iba desentumeciendo, y durante unos minutos, con el porro humeándole entre los dedos, podía ver cómo caía sobre el pasto húmedo el revoltijo de cosas todavía palpitantes y empapadas, recién molidas: la ciudad al otro lado del mundo, frases en los otros idiomas, las cortinas del apartamento diminuto donde había vivido los últimos dos años, después de divorciarse, el nauseabundo olor a especias y grasa de cordero

noded half-heartedly, though secretly he acknowledged his mother's prosperity. It wasn't by chance that she was now living amongst the affluent in one of those new houses near the Battalion, just behind the airport where, luckily, no more than two flights and the odd little plane from the Pacific Coast landed each day. The biologist found the new house uncomfortable in comparison to their old one in the centre. It was a typical example of the simplified, mechanical style of building that was spreading through the city like a plague. The thought prompted him to consider the commonplace way in which lifeforms tended to multiply in the natural world: just as prolifically, but with far greater aesthetic skill than that of any human workmanship. Honestly, there wasn't a single space in the entirety of the new house that the biologist found inviting, not one nook that might serve as a spot where he could partake in any sort of activity that might nourish his soul. The living room, the bedrooms, every room was loath to accommodate its guest. It was as though the house were made exclusively of corridors and stairs and the biologist was left no choice but to wander from one end of it to the other, climb up and down, come in and out, open and close the fridge door, sometimes curl up in front of the television. Pure activities, he thought, void of all meaning, activities which, on the other hand, were yet another consequence of his renewed condition as his mother's child. Some nights, when she had retired to bed, the biologist went out into the garden to enjoy the fresh air and smoke a joint, sitting in an old rocking chair. It was the only peaceful moment he had in that house, when something inside of him finally began to unwind and, for a few minutes, with the joint gently smoking between his fingers, he could see how the tangled knots of palpitating images, raw and freshly ground together, began to fall upon the damp lawn: the city on the other side of the world, phrases in other languages, the curtains in that tiny flat where he had lived for the past

que se metía por la ventana del patio interior y que había acabado por impregnarle toda la ropa, pedazos de memoria reciente que él trataba de procesar y estirar como si rellenara con desperdicios una especie de salchicha, deseoso pero a la vez atemorizado por la posibilidad de tropezar con algún objeto que diera consistencia y sentido al conjunto. Porque él sospechaba que en últimas la luz, la superficie suave con la que se le presentaba tal o cual recuerdo, la inminencia de un olor feliz que no llegaba, todo eso estaba secretamente recorrido por un orden, por una consigna que no acababa de formularse para él. Esa era mi vida, es todo lo que podía decir. Esa era mi vida y todo se jodió. Había una economía en esas cosas, incluso en la administración de las situaciones dolorosas, como el divorcio. Hasta el fracaso formaba parte de lo admisible. El fracaso laboral, el fracaso amoroso, cosas que no eran motivo de condena porque al final, con el debido entrenamiento, uno acababa superando el fracaso conservándose en el interior del fracaso, como hacen las aceitunas viejas en vinagre, dejando pasar el tiempo en la barra del bar, rumiando y desrumiando frases hechas junto a algún veterano de otro naufragio que, con suerte, le daría consejos sabios sobre cómo racionar el dinero del subsidio estatal, a media máquina, para seguir cultivando todos los vicios en medio de la pobreza. Por supuesto, él era consciente de que los desencadenantes habían sido externos, la cancelación del proyecto de investigación, los recortes en todos los programas científicos. El resto había consistido en dejarse caer cuesta abajo, arrastrado por la mera inercia del golpe. Pero el biólogo estaba convencido de que en la caída posterior, en ese desbarrancadero lento y rutinario que vino después, se escondía un secreto sobre él mismo, sobre su conformación más íntima, algo que en últimas le confería una identidad y hasta un estilo. Yo soy esa forma de caer, pensaba, volviendo a darle la calada final al porro. Yo soy básicamente ese modo de dejarse ir. Luego disparaba con dos dedos la

two years, following his divorce, the sickening smell of herbs and lamb fat that seeped in through the patio window of the inner courtyard and ended up impregnating all of his clothes, chunks of recent memory that he tried to process and stretch as though filling a type of sausage with scraps, longing for, but also terrified by, the possibility of stumbling upon an object that might give some consistency and meaning to it all. Because, deep down, he suspected that the light, the polished form in which his memories were resurfacing, the proximate scent of ever absent happiness, all of that was secretly run by an order, by a set of rules that didn't quite add up for him.. That was my life, is all he could say. That was my life and it all went to shit. There was economy in those sorts of things, even in managing painful situations like divorce.. Even failure formed part of the permissible. Failure at work, failure in love: such failures weren't to be punished because, in the end, with enough practice, you can overcome failure by preserving yourself within it, like an old olive in vinegar, watching time pass while sat at a bar, chewing over old adages and spitting them out alongside some other shipwrecked veteran who, if you're lucky, offers wise advice on how to ration your state benefits, stringently, in order to feed all your habits in spite of poverty. Of course, he knew that it was down to external forces, the cancellation of his research project, cuts to all the scientific programmes. The rest had consisted in him allowing himself to fall further downhill, dragged down by the sheer inertia of his setback. But the biologist was convinced that there, on that slow and stagnant precipice that followed his last fall, a deep secret about himself was hiding, something that would ultimately define him and maybe even refine him. I epitomise the fall, he thought, returning for one last puff on his joint. I practically *am* the slow decline. Then, with two fingers he shot at the final smoking ember, the tiny glimmer of ash that would have died out quietly on the damp lawn, shrouded by the

última pata del bicho humeante, casi una pizca de cenizas que iba a morir sin quejas en el pasto húmedo, arropada por el canto de mil ranitas. Entonces recobraba poco a poco la conciencia del lugar en el que se hallaba, de vuelta en la ciudad enana, de este lado del mundo, en la casa de su madre y se sentía culposo por saber que ella estaba siendo tan generosa y tan comprensiva. Al punto de no exteriorizar ningún gesto de reproche, nada que pudiera hacer evidente lo que él sabía que su madre pensaba en el fondo: que, de sus dos hijos, el mayor era el peor preparado para enfrentarse al mundo. Y que era una lástima que la vida hubiera mostrado su cara más cruel. Porque, siendo totalmente francos, ella habría preferido que el elegido para una muerte prematura fuera el biólogo y no el hijo menor, que era la verdadera dulzura de su alma, la luz de sus días, el amor fantasma, el aguacate primordial del padre ausente. Porque así lo había dispuesto ella y, sin embargo, la vida fue tan cruel, tan cruel, que torció todo lo que ella había planeado sin planear, todo lo que había dibujado en lo profundo del sueño más profundo, sobre el tablero de su corazón. Esto es: que el hijo mayor fuera el borrador y el hijo menor la versión definitiva. Pero la vida es cruel, muy cruel, decía ella cada vez que podía, la vida es dura y al mismo tiempo inestable, insensata, y la vez está regida por una geometría que no podemos conocer pero sí sentir en carne propia, y cuando uno elabora un plan, cuando uno proyecta una idea y diseña y forja y esculpe, la vida siempre se encarga de deformarlo todo, como si esa vida estuviera gobernada por demonios malignos, amantes del vericuetos y no de la línea recta, por sátiros caprichosos y no por Dios y que Dios me perdone pero a veces creo que Dios está en la muerte y no en la vida porque la muerte es el descanso eterno, la perpetua de la rectitud. En cambio, la vida, eso que llaman naturaleza, es obra del diablo, que se alía con las fieras, con las serpientes, con el alacrán. El diablo hace nido en el ojo del pájaro, en la cáscara pintada

song of a thousand frogs. Bit by bit, he began to regain consciousness of his surroundings, and he found himself once again in the dwarf city, on this side of the world, in his mother's house, and he felt guilty in the knowledge that she was being so generous and so understanding. So much so, that he held back any reproachful gesture, anything that might reveal his awareness of what his mother thought deep down: that, of her two sons, the eldest was the least prepared to face the world. And what a shame that life had revealed its cruellest side. Because, being completely honest, she would have preferred for the biologist to die a premature death and not the younger son, who was the true apple of her eye, the light of her life, the loving phantom, the primordial avocado of their absent father. Because that's how she herself had framed it, and yet, life was so cruel, so cruel, that it twisted everything she had planned without planning it, everything she'd drawn up in the depths of her deepest dreams, on the canvas of her heart. Which is: that the younger son would outlive the eldest; that the older son would be the prototype and the younger would be the finished product. But, life is cruel, so cruel, she said whenever she had the chance, life is hard and at the same time unstable, senseless and at the same time governed by a geometry that we can't come to understand but, yes, we can feel it in our own flesh, and when we devise a plan, project an idea and design and forge and sculpt, life always finds a way to unravel it all, as though this life were governed by malign demons, smoke and mirror tricksters who make mazes out of straight lines, sent by devilish satyrs and not by God, and Lord forgive me but sometimes I think God is in death and not in life because it's death that brings us eternal peace, the perpetual light of rectitude. Life, on the other hand, so-called nature, is work of the devil, who formed an alliance with the beasts, with the serpents, with the scorpion. The devil makes his nest in the eye of the bird, in the painted shell of the egg,

del huevo, en la garra de la bestia, en el reguero in the claw of the creature, in the perversions
de plumas, en el remolino del río. of the queer, in the whirlpool of the river.