

CADERNOS 27

DE LITERATURA EM TRADUÇÃO



Os Muitos Mapas da Irlanda

Cocoa l'Orange

Mary O'Donnell
(Translator) *Nahuel Videla (Argentina)*

Abstract: This work consists of the commented translation of a short story—that delves into the personal and professional impact of the COVID pandemic and the lockdowns on a married couple—written by Mary O'Donnell, a well-known and highly regarded Irish writer of poetry, short stories and novels, and published in *The Manchester Review* in August of 2022. The translation itself is preceded by comments that highlight some of the main challenges and that attempt to justify the decision-making process within the theoretical framework defined by the notion of “instrumental reading” (Averbach, 2011), and based on the analysis of differential features between English and Spanish and the translation strategies detailed by López Guix and Wilkinson (1997). The main purpose of this exercise is to bring to Spanish readers a small sample of the works of a contemporary author that dwell on topics that are relatable and relevant across borders and cultures due to the globalized nature of the major issues of this time.

Keywords: Mary O'Donnell; Irish literature; short story; pandemic lockdown; translation; languages

Comments about the translation

1. The Spanish variety chosen for this piece is that of Argentina. Some consequences of this are that the “voseo” is used in the informal second person, the periphrastic future is preferred over the simple future tense, and it justifies many lexical choices. This is based on the intended audience since this story was originally translated to be published locally and to be distributed later in the Spanish speaking market.

2. An instrumental reading (Averbach, 2011, p. 35) allowed me to define some guidelines before the translation work itself. With the main characters being a married couple, the informal treatment (“vos”) was a clear choice for dialogues. The standard use of punctuation marks also led me to adopt the same standard use of Spanish marks for dialogues and elsewhere. I kept the present tense of the storyline and the third-person narrator focused on one character (Jake).
3. The title presented a difficult decision, since expressions in French are not as common in Spanish as they are in English. Although some translation theory authors (such as López Guix and Wilkinson, p. 241) usually favour the translation into Spanish, I believe that the special relevance of the term for the story and the main character, as well as a higher frequency of use of foreign terms in the semantic field of fine foods and chocolate, justified keeping the original French words.
4. The story includes a few cultural references, either directly or indirectly. A TV show (Father Ted), a book (The Famous Five), a quote from a poem by William Cowper, as well as some elements of Irish mythology (*Tír na nÓg* and the characters Oisín and Niamh of the Golden Hair). Each presented its own difficulties. The show Father Ted was not aired in Latin America, it has no Spanish name, and it is not widely known in this region today. Although the name is relatively transparent for translation, I decided it was better to keep it in English and to include “de la serie” to guide any readers who might be interested in the correct direction. The Famous Five book series has been translated and published under the names “Los cinco” or “Los famosos cinco”. I chose the latter because it is more accurate, and I made a small expansion a few words later (“make a complete Enid Blyton”: “una obra completa de Enid Blyton”) to clarify the reference as well as to convey the meaning of the source expression, since this construction has no direct equivalent. I was not able to find any Spanish versions of the poem by William Cowper, but, since the reference is veiled and of a fraction of a line, I was spared from the challenges posed by rhyme in the original verses. The elements of Irish mythology were easier since there is Spanish literature about them. Keeping the original Irish made sense since the story itself later included an English version that could be transferred to Spanish (“Land of Youth”: “Tierra de la Juventud”), and there were a few versions of the mythological character names available for me to choose.
5. Some metalinguistic expressions required special adaptations (“the snappy sound of the ‘t’”, “Using the C-word”). To circumvent this, instead of referring

to the words themselves, I made a broader reference (“el sonido cortante de la pregunta” and “esa palabra que ella detesta por completo”), which allowed me to keep the message in a different language.

6. Of course, the general preference of English for passive voice, possessives, and adverbs requires special attention to avoid their excessive use (or misuse) in the translated version and presents a challenge. All these features were in the source text, and a few re-readings of the target version were required to remove any translationese.

Author

Mary O'Donnell has worked professionally as a writer of fiction and poetry for over thirty years. She participates in literary festivals, conferences, and has adjudicated major literary prizes and awards, among them the Dublin Literary Award. She holds honours degrees in German and Philosophy, and a PhD from University College Cork. With four novels, one of which was an Irish best-seller (reissued in 2018), three collections of prize-winning short stories, and eight collections of poetry, she is well known in Ireland. She co-edited (with Manuela Palacios) the anthology of Galician Women's poetry, *To the Winds Our Sails*. A collection of essays on O'Donnell's work appeared during 2018: *Giving Shape to the Moment: the Art of Mary O'Donnell, Poet, Novelist, Short-story Writer* (Peter Lang), edited by Prof Elena Jaime de Pablos, with contributions from Spanish and Irish academics and writers. Her selected poetry is translated to Hungarian. She has been an invited speaker, reader and lecturer to literary events in Sweden, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Argentina, and Brazil. A member of Ireland's affiliation of artists, Aosdána, she lives in the country in County Kildare.

www.maryodonnell.com

Cocoa l'Orange

Like a crouching battalion, the thirty houses in *Heatherbell Way* nestle along the incline of the mountain. The McEntee's long landing window is positioned directly opposite the window of the Kearney's master bedroom, slightly to the left of its en-suite bathroom.

Since the first lockdown, Jake Kearney has spent more time than usual in both bedroom and en-suite, attending to bodily grooming, or sometimes, slumped

on the side of the bed, doing a quick scan of the novels left around by his wife Sasha. She considers reading to be a positive thing. Jake has never bothered with fiction, preferring non-fiction and biographies.

His reading *is* urgent, he knows that, his eye leaps paragraphs ahead over hundreds of words, in search of the right one, the meaningful one that will explain everything for him, even when he's not quite sure what the question is in the first place. At the very least, reading adds another segment to the vast, black-hole hours which must be plugged.

Sasha has full working days. She is needed by others to do a specific task, and might wear track-suit bottoms while presenting a blouse and sharply tailored navy jacket to the oblong face of the circuit court judge. Jake, on the other hand, is aimless. He acknowledges this each time he glances out the bedroom window having just trimmed his toenails and treated the mottled patches of his toenail fungus yet again, to find himself staring into the face of his neighbour Ned, whose doleful dark eyes and cockroach brows appear, apparition-like, every few days. Ned reminds him of Fr Stone from Father Ted, the most boring priest on the planet, except Ned isn't a priest, but a locked-down once fashionable green-grocer whose city centre vegetable and fruit emporium, *The Sweet Pea*—just off Grafton Street—is closed because everyone is working from home and vegan tourists are a distant memory.

Sometimes Jake nods fractionally at Ned, uncertain as to whether the other man is actually seeing him. He thinks of those suspected propped up corpses the Russian administration was supposed to have used in the days when a powerful prime minister—ancient and ill—could not be seen to have actually died but wasn't so alive either. Sometimes Ned nods back. They stare into one another's faces. Then Ned usually turns away and withdraws into the gloom of his landing.

Before lockdown, they rarely did more than glance and wave from car to car—Ned drove an upgraded vintage Rolls Royce that sailed forth magisterially whenever he sat into it. It's in the garage now, unused. Jake's Prius Hybrid has cooled its environmental jets, as there's no place to go and nobody to visit. His business has also folded. Sofia, his Estonian co-worker and the best chocolate maker he's ever employed, has moved on in search of a means of surviving.

He misses work in the small factory outside Bray. He misses Sofia also because she was a good laugh and an antidote to Sasha's serious ways, as well as being a reliable worker. She knew how to use the enrober, the truffle-rolling machine and the coating machine. Her chocolate was perfect, heated and mixed just the

right amount to form crystals. He could pop out for the occasional half hour for bank business or to hook up with one of the other small business owners in the industrial park, knowing she knew what to do.

He doesn't understand the fuss about people putting on weight during the first lockdown and then later on in the second one. Whatever those tubbies are shovelling into themselves it isn't his artisan chocolate, which is gathering mould in the unheated factory where the sun sometimes streams in and turns the air to a broiling stew. He managed to get rid of what was hygienically safe to sell, then resorted to selling bags of broken chocolate to the local kids, who turned up on the doorstep, keen as ferrets once the word got out.

Thursday is Sasha's self-care day. He can hear the soft but clear voice of her yoga master coming through on Zoom in the next bedroom. *'Breathe in . . . now hold for 5 . . . and breathe out again, remembering to hold in those abdominals . . .'*

Sasha is relentlessly maintaining herself, determined to follow the rules and survive. Despite her evening breakouts with the wine, she hasn't gained an inch of flab due to bi-weekly sessions with a body-coach. That *she* has a job while he hasn't, is something that registers as an ongoing siege with his own jealousy. He never says anything embittered, but it leaks out anyway, with a sudden need to pace up and down the hall when she's chortling easily with a fellow professional on the laptop screen.

Unlike him, she's always had tribes of friends. She's part of a cosy little bubble of five, and when they're not having their TGIF glass of online wine, they're meeting at a safely maintained distance of two or more metres outside a café. There's Sasha, Sebastian, Fionn, Cathy and Wynette. The Famous Five, he tells himself cynically. All they need is the dog Timmy and they'd make a complete Enid Blyton of it.

He checks his watch. She'll be finished in half an hour, he reckons, by which time it will be his turn to have some kind of dinner underway. He ponders the question of what they might eat and makes his way downstairs. There'll be time enough tomorrow to stare back at. He reckons they've found a rhythm, and admits to some slight release in staring at another man in the same boat as himself.

It's all in a look. Each stares into the face of the other, observes, watches, traces the blank misery, the despair, the tamped down maleness of the other. At least, he hopes Ned feels the same. The truth is, the virus might as well have caught them both by the balls and twisted hard. It's a wonder he isn't speaking in a falsetto.

He opens the fridge and scans the shelves. Smoked salmon no, eggs no, he pulls out the meat drawer to find the usual unused packs of bacon and sausages. He wonders why they both avoid having a damn good fry-up, as if bacon and sausages alone raised cholesterol. In his case, the cholesterol lay in ‘the widow maker’, the cardiac man at the south city clinic informed him. Maybe twenty percent build-up in that left anterior descending artery, or the LAD, he joked. Jake’s hunch is that Sasha’s is elevated because of the wine she consumes. What is it now, half a bottle a night? When he raised the matter with her, she became defensive and told him he was trying to control her. He sighs as he contemplates an aubergine and two red peppers.

He continues to peer into the fridge, regarding a stack of cholesterol-lowering dairy drinks. Then, unbidden, an image of his finest chocolates floats to the surface of his mind, crushing him. Glossy, buttery, *Tir na nÓg* mouthfuls of ecstasy. Straight from the Land of Youth in the old legend in which Oisín and Niamh of the Golden Hair rode on a mighty white horse. He used to call Sasha his Niamh of the Golden Hair, when her hair was long and fair. Tears begin to prick in his eyes as he recalls the weekly cargo flown fresh to New York, Boston, Chicago and LA.

Completely steamed up now, he slams the fridge door shut and rummages in the freezer. Finds two pieces of seabass, solidly frozen. Picking up pace—it’s 5.30 and Sasha will appear soon—he finds a platter, shoves them in the microwave to thaw, then grabs the single aubergine and the two peppers before gathering potatoes from a bucket near the sink. *Garlic*, he thinks, *where’s the fucking garlic?* A single clove lurks at the bottom of the vegetable basket. He unpeels it and starts to chop fiercely, forehead perspiring.

*

‘Thanks, I’m starving.’ Sasha glides into her place at the table in calm post-yoga demeanour. Having prepared and cooked the meal, he feels slightly calmer.

‘Yumm, amazing!’ she murmurs, spearing a fragrant red pepper piece on the end of her fork and slipping it hungrily between her lips. Mollified, he smiles.

He’d consulted *Rick Stein’s Secret France* for the recipe. The aubergines were sliced and salted for half an hour before he fried them in virgin olive oil with the peppers, after which he added a tin of crushed tomatoes and the miserable squidgy

of garlic clove. Then seabass, fried gently, and seasoned boiled potatoes, garnished with a dash of horseradish. He considered it a tasty, basic meal.

'I'm out tomorrow with the gang,' Sasha remarks.

'Walking. Again?'

'Yes. Why?'

He murmurs quickly 'I just wondered. Didn't mean anything.'

'Menlo Forest is open, thank *Christ*.'

'Coffee afterwards in that café?'

'Outside it.'

'What if it rains?'

'I've checked the weather app. Grey but dry tomorrow.'

He senses she's as fed up with him as he is with her. After months of fairly civilised getting along, collaborating on this and that domestic project—though in truth, collaboration meant capitulation to Sasha's ideas on everything domestic, not that he'd say as much. On impulse, he reaches across and catches her gently by the wrist. She looks up, surprised.

'What?'

Even the snappy sound of the 't', the half-annoyed frown on her brow, irritates him, but he persists. 'I just wanted to hold your hand, that's all.' There *were* no words to cover the terrain of wobbling emotions and future uncertainties. Those available to them might, he suspects, be vicious.

She relinquishes her arm and eases her palm against his. 'I guess we don't do enough of this.'

'You know we don't.'

She squeezes his hand lightly, forking a piece of fish towards her mouth with the free hand.

He observes her chewing, her brows slightly dipped as if concentrating either on the eating or on thoughts of what's happening between them.

'The truth is . . . I suppose . . .'

He knows what's coming.

'... I do get a bit exasperated with you.'

He waits.

'You're a good man, a great man in fact, but you drive me fucking mad, right?'

He's amazed at how casually patronising she can sound. 'You grind my gears too,' his reply emerges, a calm statement.

Her eyebrows perk up. He nods again. 'That's the truth,' he holds her stare.

'What the hell have I done?' She snaps her hand back from his.

'Nothing specific. I mean, neither of us has *done* anything—'

He falls silent as a new wave of despair washes through him, and her face freezes over to contain the emotion which is surely agitating her. It's a face known to him for more than twenty-five years, one which has radiated the kindest of signals and signs, the most ecstatic too, when on holiday and they were free, a face cool and dispassionate in the courts, but which could break with hilarity at the casual suppers they used to throw. This face was his unwritten language, but somehow he can no longer quite translate it. He puts down his fork, swallows quickly. His throat has seized up as if he's about to cry. Again? The virus. That bloody virus, that microscopic ball with the little cartoon feet, that invisible bauble has ruined *everything*.

'Well,' she rationalises, 'you've lost a business and it has affected you more than you'll admit.'

Now a gear-change, soaring ahead beyond fourth, to fifth, into overdrive.

'Eh—I didn't 'lose' the business. It's not something I, like, actually tossed away—' he counters.

'Fuck's sake Jake, you're so literal! That's not what I meant—'

'Ned next door is in the same boat, I'm not the only one—'

'What the hell did he expect? A fucking green-grocers was always going to take the hit, just like a chocolate shop!'

He draws a breath inwards, then exhales gradually. 'It was an *enterprise*, a chocolate *enterprise*.'

'Oh big fucking deal. I'm telling the truth if you'd only listen.'

'I never stop listening. I want to make you happy.'

'Actually, this isn't about my happiness, Jake. It's more about yours.'

'Happiness? My *happiness*, is that it?' His shoulders shake as he laughs bitterly. 'I never think about happiness these days, you know.'

'We could have it worse,' she adds. 'At least one of us can work.'

'Yes,' he admits.

But she goes on, as Sasha always does.

'If it weren't for me we wouldn't have a roof over our heads, you realise that?'

Now she's done it. Now he feels like swearing. Using the C-word, which she absolutely detests. On it goes for a while, the snapping and snarling like two enraged curs. Opposite them, the television is on mute as the world plays out its filmed day. The eager, expressive face of the news reporter in Washington reporting on the despot's latest response to the 'China virus'. Then the home stories. Teacher unions, doctors, front workers. A vox-pop of cantankerous people blaming Christmas overseas visitors, who partied and spread the new variant. The calm but concerned faces of the men in charge asking people to stay at home.

By the time the bickering ceases, they are both following the television even though it's on mute. Sasha has drained her second glass of wine. Jake sips water, more to relax his throat and prevent him from screaming than from actual thirst. He's just told her that if she's finding it all too much, she should draw up the divorce papers.

'Feel free!' he shouts, without really meaning it. 'Anytime! We can head off into the blue with all the other silver splitters!'

Sasha ignores this, her expression inscrutable, the way it is when she's in court. They sit sullenly until she shoves an opened pack of bitter orange *Tir na nÓg* in his direction. He accepts, breaks off two squares and slips them into his mouth. The chocolate melts slowly along the inside of his cheeks, all around his tongue.

There will be no divorce. Neither wants it. Sasha clears up after the meal and Jake stretches out on the sofa, tries to concentrate on a book about corvids which she gifted him at Christmas.

The night darkens, deepens. The entire road is silent, each house locked in a thin fog. Somewhere a dog barks, then stops. A front door slams shut. Jake and Sasha decide to sleep separately, mainly because of her snoring. They both blame it on eating late. He blames it on the wine but doesn't say so. Sasha tells him that tomorrow on the forest walk, Wynette and Fionn will bring coffee and rolls, then

they'll sing together beneath the high conifers near the lake, and Cathy will certainly embrace a few tree-trunks. *Mad, isn't it*, she whispers in a conciliatory way before he heads into the spare room, *but whatever takes us through, right?* He nods in agreement, pecks her on the cheek. How good she smells, he thinks, automatically drawing her closer, waiting until she raises her arms to embrace him too. They stand like that outside the spare room, rocking one another, her head relaxes and she lets it rest against his shoulder. They say good-night, slowly, without kissing. This is enough, he thinks, not quite ready to touch his lips to hers.

Once in the bedroom, he strips to his underwear and throws himself beneath the duvet, then stares at the ceiling for a long time. The pressure of the day subsides. He can still smell Sasha in his arms, a signature skin odour, her delicate musk.

By mid-morning on Friday she has gone to the forest. A wintry sun shines and he has the house to himself. Still in his underwear, he connects to Spotify, checks out his various collections before settling on *Moods Upbeat and Even*. The Kinks, Genesis, Velvet Underground, Ultra Vox, Tom Waits. The house pulsates with sound. He's feeling creative and intends to do something with chocolate. As usual, he's not certain what the outcome will be, but chocolate is an art-form, although Sasha, predictably, views it solely as business. He stares into the copper bain-marie on the gas hob and lets three drops of intense orange essence and a hint of chilli fall into the chocolate, which gradually melts, the aroma sweet and comforting, hitting his olfactory receptors. *Cocoa l'Orange*, he decides, his favourite.

He rummages in a high cupboard and retrieves a set of moulds. Diverse shapes, ranging from butterflies to hearts to flowers. Again, he checks the copper bowl. The chocolate is fully melted, bubbling slowly like the warm muds of Rotorua in New Zealand. He'd like to sit into a pool of either warm mud or chocolate right now, to cover his legs, his bollocks, his chest, all the way up to his neck, and rest there until he was a coated, cleansed, saturated chocolate man. Instead, he goes to the hallway and studies himself in the mirror, bowl in hand. He dips his fingers into the chocolate, rubbing fingers and thumb together as if to get a sense of his medium. Then, a dark brown line down his nose. He looks primitive. He looks like a horse in a Cubist painting. The mix is viscous and does not drip. Now a dense curve darkens the path from temple to temple across his high forehead. Two smears on the outer edges of his eyelids, more like dots really. He continues with chocolate lines moving out from the corners of each eye, as if he were in a Chinese opera, then the long downward curve towards his jawline and along the chin.

Already, the chocolate is firming like a mask. He almost laughs but suppresses it so as not to crack the chocolate, which is so smooth, so dense and reddish brown. *Monarch of all I survey*, he intones between his teeth, *monarch of all I survey*. Then suddenly, another fit of weeping surges, and he is like the crying clown in a circus, as the chocolate cracks and splinters down onto the wooden floor.

Get busy, man, get busy! he urges, gulping, catching his breath, wiping his face of chocolate and tears in the downstairs bathroom. When he has tidied up the hall and removed all traces of chocolate, he returns to the kitchen, gets out the bain-marie again and melts a new mix, adding extra orange essence, but slightly less chilli. Carefully, he pours the finished mix into the moulds, wondering briefly if such moulds are a bit too feminine. He might have opted for blunt squares, triangles and rectangles. Too late. The chocolate is cooling. Quickly, he slips it into the top shelf of the fridge and tidies up again. He's done three trays.

An hour later, he has changed into a loose muslin shirt and clean jeans. He enters the en-suite. He is carrying one mould of fresh chocolate pieces set onto a golden ceramic plate, usually kept for Christmas. The air is still damp from Sasha's earlier shower, and the odour of a drying towel rises from the radiator. The scent of her shower gel—something slightly Scandinavian and outdoorsy—rosemary or birchwood, permeates the air. He places the plate on the edge of the wide sink, then turns towards the window.

Ned is there, his sad eyes boring across the space between the two houses. Jake takes up position and gazes straight back, focusing on the eyes, which are probably a mere twelve feet away if he were to measure it. What a face, he thinks, drinking it in, a grey face with grey eyes and a strong brow, one he knows yet does not know, whose subtle semiotics are his to untangle and explore.

At first, he wonders if the frosty sunshine is creating a glare, if Ned isn't actually seeing him. But then, recognition creeps along the other man's face, which for a time remains morose, before it twitches in a minor yet perceptible way. He meets Ned's expression. It's all in the eyes, the skin around them crinkling a little, as if with suppressed laughter.

And when the other man slowly raises his hand in what could be a wave or an attempt at reaching out, Jake raises his too. He stretches back to the plate, turns and elevates it with both arms before the window. The sun strikes the golden surface and a series of prismic rays dance across the space between the houses. Finally, Ned nods again. Jake sees him swallow. Although the sun threatens to soften the chocolate, they stand, transfixed by light, by the golden rim of the platter, its centre dark eye of *Cocoa l'Orange*.

Cocoa l'Orange

(publicado en *Manchester Review*, dic. de 2021, pág. 174)

Como un batallón agazapado, las treinta casas en Heatherbell Way descansan sobre la ladera de la montaña. La ventana larga del descanso de los McEntee está justo frente a la ventana del dormitorio principal de los Kearney, un poco a la izquierda del baño en suite.

Desde la primera cuarentena, Jake Kearney ha pasado más tiempo de lo normal en el cuarto y el baño, dedicado al aseo corporal o, a veces, encorvado en el costado de la cama, hojeando rápidamente las novelas que deja su esposa Sasha. Ella opina que leer es algo positivo. Jake nunca se interesó por la ficción. Más bien, prefiere la no ficción y las biografías.

Su lectura es urgente, lo sabe. El ojo saltea párrafos extensos en busca de la palabra indicada y significativa que le explicará todo, incluso aunque, para empezar, no sabe bien cuál es la pregunta. Al menos, la lectura aporta otro segmento al gigante agujero negro de horas por rellenar.

Sasha trabaja a tiempo completo. Otros necesitan que ella haga una tarea específica, y puede usar pantalones deportivos mientras presenta una blusa y un pulcro saco azul marino ante la cara alargada del juez del tribunal de circuito. Jake, por el contrario, está a la deriva. Lo admite cada vez que mira por la ventana del cuarto, después de cortarse las uñas de los pies y tratar por centésima vez los parches moteados de hongos en el dedo gordo, para toparse con la cara de su vecino Ned, cuyos ojos tristes y oscuros y cejas de cucaracha se materializan, como una aparición, cada pocos días. Ned le recuerda al padre Stone de la serie *Father Ted*, el cura más aburrido del planeta, solo que Ned no es un cura sino un verdulero que supo estar de moda y que ahora está en cuarentena. The Sweet Pea, su importante negocio de frutas y verduras en el centro de la ciudad —justo pasando Grafton Street—, está cerrado porque todos trabajan desde sus casas y los turistas veganos son un recuerdo lejano.

A veces, Jake saluda de forma casi imperceptible a Ned, sin saber del todo si el otro hombre realmente lo mira. Piensa en los supuestos cadáveres de utilería que el gobierno ruso habría usado cuando no podía admitir la agonía de un primer ministro poderoso, viejo y enfermo, que no estaba ni vivo ni muerto. A veces, Ned le regresa el gesto. Se miran a la cara. Luego, Ned suele darse vuelta y retirarse a la penumbra del rellano.

Antes de la cuarentena, apenas hacían más que mirarse y agitar el brazo desde el auto. Ned manejaba un Rolls Royce de colección modificado que se movía con dignidad cuando estaba al volante. Ahora está en el garage, sin uso. La propulsión ecológica del Prius híbrido de Jake se enfrió, sin lugares a donde ir ni gente que visitar. Su empresa también quebró. Sofia, su compañera estonia y la mejor fabricante de chocolate que contrató jamás, lo dejó en búsqueda de otros medios de subsistencia.

Extraña trabajar en la pequeña fábrica en las afueras de Bray. También extraña a Sofia porque, además de ser una empleada confiable, era graciosa y un antídoto contra la seriedad de Sasha. Sabía usar la máquina bañadora, la extrusora para trufas y la recubridora. Su chocolate era perfecto, con la temperatura y la mezcla justas para formar cristales. Podía salir un rato para ir al banco o charlar con los otros pequeños empresarios del parque industrial con la tranquilidad de que ella sabía qué hacer.

No entiende el problema con las personas que aumentaron de peso en la primera cuarentena y, después, en la segunda. Lo que sea que esos gorditos engullen no es su chocolate artesanal, que junta moho en la fábrica sin aire acondicionado, donde a veces el sol entra a raudales y hace hervir el aire como un caldo. Pudo deshacerse de las cosas en buen estado y, luego, recurrió a la venta de bolsas de chocolate roto entre los niños del barrio, que, ni bien se corrió la voz, aparecieron en la puerta ávidos como hurones.

El jueves es el día que Sasha dedica a cuidarse. Puede escuchar la voz suave pero clara del maestro de yoga que llega por Zoom en el cuarto contiguo.

—Inhalá... ahora mantené por 5... y exhalá, sin aflojar el abdomen...

Sasha se cuida de forma implacable, decidida a seguir las reglas y sobrevivir. A pesar de los excesos de vino por las noches, no subió ni un gramo de grasa gracias a las dos sesiones por semana con el entrenador. Que ella tenga trabajo y él no es algo que percibe como un asedio constante a su propia envidia. Nunca dice nada con amargura, pero se le escapa igual en esa necesidad repentina de dar vueltas por el pasillo mientras ella habla cómodamente con un colega en la pantalla de la laptop.

A diferencia de él, ella siempre tuvo tribus de amigos. Es parte de una cómoda burbuja de cinco que, cuando no festeja los viernes con un vaso de vino en línea, se reúne a una distancia segura de dos metros o más afuera de un café. Sasha, Sebastian, Fionn, Cathy y Wynette. *Los famosos cinco*, se dice con cinismo. Solo les falta el perro Timmy para ser una obra completa de Enid Blyton.

Mira el reloj. Ella va a terminar en media hora, calcula, y le toca a él tener algún tipo de cena encaminada. Piensa en qué podrían comer y baja las escaleras. Mañana tendrán tiempo suficiente para mirarse. Cree que encontraron un ritmo y admite cierta liberación en el hecho de ver a otro hombre que está en el mismo barco.

Todo está en la mirada. Cada uno mira la cara del otro, observa, ve, detecta la vacía miseria, la desesperación, la masculinidad aplastada del otro. Al menos, espera que Ned sienta lo mismo. La verdad es que sería igual si el virus les hubiera agarrado las pelotas y se las hubiera retorcido. Es un milagro que no hable con voz de falsete.

Abre la heladera y revisa los estantes. Salmón ahumado, no. Huevos, no. Abre el cajón de la carne para encontrar los paquetes habituales de panceta y salchichas sin usar. Se pregunta por qué los dos evitan una buena comida frita, como si solo la panceta y las salchichas hicieran subir el colesterol. En su caso, el colesterol está en nivel crítico, según le informó el cardiólogo de la clínica del sur de la ciudad. Había bromeado con una posible obstrucción del veinte por ciento en la arteria descendente anterior. Jake intuye que el de Sasha es alto por todo el vino que toma. ¿Cuánto es ahora, media botella por noche? Cuando le planteó el tema, ella se puso a la defensiva y le dijo que intentaba controlarla. Suspira mientras contempla una berenjena y dos morrones rojos.

Sigue estudiando la heladera y mira una pila de bebidas lácteas para bajar el colesterol. Luego, de repente, una imagen de sus chocolates más finos le viene a la mente y lo aplasta. Bocados de éxtasis brillantes, mantecosos, dignos de *Tir na nÓg*. Directos de la legendaria Tierra de la Juventud, donde Oisín y Niamh del Cabello Dorado montaban un poderoso caballo blanco. Solía decirle a Sasha que era su Niamh del Cabello Dorado cuando tenía el pelo largo y rubio. Le asoman lágrimas en los ojos cuando recuerda los cargamentos semanales que enviaban por avión a Nueva York, Boston, Chicago y Los Ángeles.

Ahora enojado, cierra la heladera de un portazo y revuelve el congelador. Encuentra dos piezas congeladas de corvina. Acelerando el paso —son las 5:30 y Sasha va a aparecer pronto—, busca una fuente y las pone en el microondas para descongelar. Luego, toma la berenjena y los dos morrones antes de agarrar papas de un balde cerca de la pileta. «Ajo», piensa, «¿dónde mierda está el ajo?». Un diente solitario se esconde en el fondo de la cesta de verduras. Lo pela y empieza a cortarlo con furia, la frente sudorosa.

—Gracias, me muero de hambre.

Sasha aterriza en su lugar a la mesa con la actitud relajada que le sigue a la clase de yoga. Después de preparar y cocinar la cena, Jake se siente un poco más tranquilo.

—¡Mm, increíble! —murmura mientras atraviesa un trozo fragante de morrón rojo con el tenedor y se lo lleva a los labios con apetito. Él sonríe, apaciguado.

La receta era de *Rick Stein's Secret France*. Había rebanado y salteado las berenjenas media hora antes de freírlas en aceite de oliva virgen con los morrones. Después había agregado una lata de tomate triturado y el miserable puré del diente de ajo. Luego la corvina, freída suavemente, y las papas hervidas y condimentadas con un toque de rábano. En su opinión, una comida sabrosa y básica.

—Mañana salgo con la banda —comenta Sasha.

—A caminar. ¿Otra vez?

—Sí. ¿Por qué?

—Solo preguntaba. No es nada —murmura rápidamente.

—El bosque de Menlo está abierto, gracias a Dios.

—¿Después toman algo en ese café?

—Afuera.

—¿Y si llueve?

—Ya miré la aplicación del clima. Mañana va a estar nublado, pero seco.

Siente que ella está igual de cansada con él que él con ella, después de meses de convivencia bastante civilizada y colaboración en distintos proyectos hogareños... en verdad, colaborar significaba rendirse a las ideas de Sasha sobre cualquier cosa doméstica, aunque no lo dijera. Impulsivamente, se estira y le toma la muñeca con suavidad. Ella lo mira, sorprendida.

—¿Qué?

Hasta el sonido cortante de la pregunta y el gesto medio de molestia en las cejas lo irritan, pero insiste.

—Solo quería darte la mano, nada más.

No había palabras que expresaran todas las endebles emociones y las incertidumbres por el futuro. Aquellas que tenían a su disposición, sospecha, podrían ser crueles.

Ella afloja el brazo y apoya la palma contra la de él.

—Supongo que no lo hacemos lo suficiente.

—Sabés que no.

Ella le aprieta un poco la mano mientras lleva un trozo de pescado a la boca con la otra.

La observa masticar con el ceño levemente fruncido, como si se concentrara en comer o en reflexionar sobre lo que pasa entre ellos.

—La verdad es que... supongo...

Jake sabe lo que se viene.

—... es cierto que me exasperás un poco.

La espera.

—Sos un buen hombre, incluso excelente, pero me volvéis loca, ¿sabés?

Le sorprende lo casual y condescendiente que puede ser.

—Vos también a mí. —La respuesta surge como una afirmación tranquila.

Ella sube las cejas. Él asiente otra vez.

—Es la verdad —dice mientras sostiene la mirada.

—¿Qué hice yo? —Quita rápidamente la mano.

—Nada específico. Es decir, ninguno de los dos hizo nada...

Se queda callado mientras lo invade una nueva oleada de desesperación; la cara de ella se congela para contener las emociones que, sin duda, la estremecen. Es una cara que él conoce desde hace más de veinticinco años, una que irradió los signos y las señas más bondadosas, las de mayor euforia, también, cuando estaban de vacaciones y libres, una cara fría y desapasionada en los juzgados, pero que podía transfigurarse de risa en las cenas informales que solían organizar. Esta cara era un

idioma no escrito que le pertenecía, pero, de alguna forma, ya no puede traducirla del todo. Apoya el tenedor y traga rápidamente. La garganta se le atenaza como si fuera a llorar. ¿Otra vez? El virus. Ese estúpido virus, esa pelota microscópica con pies de dibujo animado, esa chuchería invisible que arruinó todo.

—Bueno —racionaliza ella—, vos perdiste un negocio y te afectó más de lo que querés admitir.

Ahora subió un cambio, volando por la cuarta y la quinta, directo a la sobremarcha.

—No «perdí» el negocio. No es algo que tiré por ahí... —replica.

—La puta madre, Jake, sos tan literal. No es lo que quería decir...

—El vecino Ned está en la misma situación, no soy el único...

—¿Y qué mierda esperaba? ¡A una verdulería siempre le pega fuerte, igual que a una chocolatería!

Él inhala y luego exhala de a poco.

—Era una empresa, una empresa de chocolate.

—Guau, ¿a quién le importa? Yo te digo la verdad, vos no querés escucharla.

—Nunca dejé de escucharte. Quiero hacerte feliz.

—En realidad, esto no es por mi felicidad, Jake. Es más bien por la tuya.

—¿Felicidad? ¿Es por mi felicidad, entonces? —Los hombros le tiemblan mientras ríe con amargura—. Nunca pienso en la felicidad últimamente, ¿sabés?

—Podría ser peor —agrega ella—. Al menos uno de nosotros puede trabajar.

—Sí —admite él.

Pero Sasha sigue, como siempre.

—Si no fuera por mí, no tendríamos techo, ¿te das cuenta?

Ahora lo hizo. Él siente ganas de insultar. De usar esa palabra que ella detesta por completo. Siguen así un rato, con ataques y gruñidos como dos perros rabiosos. Frente a ellos, la televisión está en silencio y muestra los videos del día de todo el mundo. La cara ansiosa y expresiva del reportero en Washington que informa la respuesta más reciente del déspota al «virus de China». Luego, las historias

locales. Sindicatos docentes, médicos, trabajadores de primera línea. El vocero de un montón de malhumorados que culpa a los turistas extranjeros en Navidad por celebrar y contagiar la variante nueva. Los rostros calmos pero preocupados de los hombres encargados de pedir a la gente que se quede en su casa.

Para cuando la discusión termina, los dos están prestando atención al televisor, aunque sigue en silencio. Sasha terminó su segundo vaso de vino. Jake toma sorbos de agua, más para relajar la garganta y no gritar que por sed. Recién dijo que, si a ella le parecía demasiado, debería preparar los papeles de divorcio.

—¡Sentite libre! —exclama, sin decirlo en serio—. ¡Cuando quieras! ¡Podemos desaparecer con todos los demás cincuentones divorciados!

Sasha lo ignora con una expresión inescrutable, igual que cuando está en el juzgado. Se sientan en silencio hasta que ella le encaja un paquete abierto de chocolate amargo con naranja de *Tir na nÓg*. Él lo toma, rompe dos cuadrados y se los mete en la boca. El chocolate se derrite lentamente en las mejillas y alrededor de la lengua.

No habrá divorcio. Ninguno lo quiere. Sasha limpia los restos de la comida y Jake se estira en el sillón mientras intenta concentrarse en un libro sobre córvidos que ella le regaló en Navidad.

La noche se hace más oscura y profunda. Toda la calle está en silencio, cada casa envuelta en una niebla débil. En algún lado, un perro ladra y luego, calla. Se escucha un portazo. Jake y Sasha deciden dormir separados, más que nada porque ella ronca. Ambos dicen que es por comer tarde. Él piensa que es por el vino, pero se guarda sus palabras. Sasha le dice que el día siguiente, en la caminata por el bosque, Wynette y Fionn van a llevar café y bollos; luego, van a cantar juntos debajo de las coníferas altas cerca del lago, y Cathy seguro va a abrazar algunos troncos. «Una locura, ¿no?», le susurra de forma conciliadora antes de que él se vaya al cuarto de huéspedes, «pero lo que sea que nos ayude a pasar esto, ¿verdad?». Él asiente y le da un beso en la mejilla. «Qué bien que huele», piensa; la acerca de forma automática y espera hasta que ella también lo abraza. Se quedan parados así afuera del cuarto, meciéndose mutuamente; ella relaja la cabeza y la apoya contra el hombro. Se dicen buenas noches, despacio, sin darse un beso. «Ya es suficiente», piensa él, todavía no del todo listo para tocar los labios de ella con los suyos.

En el cuarto, se desviste hasta la ropa interior y se tira debajo de la manta. Luego, mira el techo un largo rato. La presión del día cede. Todavía puede sentir

el aroma de Sasha en los brazos, la fragancia característica de la piel, un delicado almizcle.

Para la media mañana del viernes, ella ya salió al bosque. Brilla un sol invernal y tiene la casa para él solo. Todavía en ropa interior, abre Spotify y mira las distintas listas antes de decidirse por *Estado de ánimo optimista y estable*. The Kinks, Genesis, Velvet Underground, Ultra Vox, Tom Waitts. La casa late con el sonido. Se siente creativo y planea hacer algo con chocolate. Como siempre, no está seguro de cuál será el resultado, pero el chocolate es una forma de arte, aunque Sasha, previsiblemente, lo ve solo como un negocio. Mira la olla de cobre para baño maría en la hornalla de gas y deja caer tres gotas de esencia intensa de naranja y una pizca de chile en el chocolate, que se derrite de a poco, mientras el aroma suave y reconfortante le golpea los receptores olfativos. *Cocoa l'Orange*, decide, su favorito.

Revuelve un mueble alto y saca un juego de moldes. Distintas formas, desde mariposas hasta corazones y flores. Otra vez, controla el recipiente de cobre. El chocolate se derritió por completo y burbujea suavemente, como el lodo cálido de Rotorua, en Nueva Zelanda. Le gustaría sentarse dentro de una pileta de barro o chocolate caliente ahora mismo, cubrirse las piernas, las bolas, el pecho, el cuello, y descansar allí hasta convertirse en un hombre de chocolate, recubierto, purificado, saturado. En su lugar, va al pasillo y se estudia en el espejo, con el recipiente en la mano. Sumerge los dedos en el chocolate, los frota con el pulgar, como para hacerse a la idea de su medio. Luego, una línea de color marrón oscuro en la nariz. Tiene un aspecto primitivo. Parece un caballo en un cuadro cubista. La mezcla es viscosa y no gotea. Ahora una curva densa oscurece el camino entre las sienes, a lo largo de la parte alta de la frente. Dos manchas en los bordes externos de los párpados, más bien como puntos. Sigue con líneas de chocolate que salen de las esquinas de cada ojo, como si estuviera en una ópera china, y luego con una curva larga que baja por la barbilla hacia la mandíbula.

El chocolate ya se endurece como una máscara. Casi se ríe, pero está tan suave, tan denso y de un color marrón rojizo, que se contiene para no romperlo.

—Monarca de todo lo que veo —entona entre dientes—, monarca de todo lo que veo.

Luego, de repente, otro rapto de llanto, y es como el payaso que llora en el circo mientras el chocolate se quiebra y cae al piso de madera.

—¡Movete, hombre, movete! —se anima. Después traga, recupera el aliento y se limpia el chocolate y las lágrimas de la cara en el baño de abajo. Cuando termina de acomodar el pasillo y de quitar todo rastro de chocolate, regresa a la cocina, vuelve a sacar el baño maría y derrite una mezcla nueva, con más esencia de naranja pero un poco menos de chile. Con cuidado, vuelca la mezcla terminada en los moldes y se pregunta por un momento si los moldes son demasiado femeninos. Podría haber elegido los sobrios cuadrados, triángulos y rectángulos. Demasiado tarde. El chocolate se está enfriando. Lo desliza rápidamente en el estante de arriba de la heladera y ordena de nuevo. Hizo tres bandejas.

Una hora después, tiene puesta una camisa suelta de muselina y unos jeans limpios. Entra al baño en suite. Lleva un molde de trozos frescos de chocolate dispuestos en un plato de cerámica dorado, que suelen usar en Navidad. El aire sigue húmedo por la ducha de Sasha más temprano, y el olor de una toalla secándose sube del radiador. El aroma a romero o abedul del gel de ducha —ligeramente escandinavo y salvaje— permea el aire. Pone el plato en el borde de la ancha piletta y luego se gira hacia la ventana.

Ned está allí, taladrando el espacio entre las dos casas con los ojos tristes. Jake toma su puesto y le regresa la mirada: se concentra en los ojos, apenas a doce pies si lo midiera. «¡Qué cara!», piensa mientras la absorbe, una cara gris con ojos grises y una frente marcada, una que conoce pero no conoce, con una semiótica sutil que es suya para desentrañar y explorar.

Primero se pregunta si la gélida luz del sol crea un reflejo, si Ned realmente lo está viendo. El otro hombre permanece taciturno por un momento hasta que lo distingue de a poco y tuerce la cara de forma leve, pero perceptible. Jake estudia la expresión de Ned. Todo está en los ojos, la piel un poco arrugada alrededor de ellos, como si contuviera la risa.

Y cuando el otro hombre alza lentamente la mano en lo que podría ser un saludo o un intento de alcanzarlo, Jake levanta la suya. Se estira para tomar el plato, se gira y lo levanta con ambos brazos frente a la ventana. El sol golpea la superficie dorada y una serie de rayos prismáticos baila en el espacio entre las casas. Por fin, Ned vuelve a asentir. Jake lo ve tragar. Aunque el sol amenaza con ablandar el chocolate, se quedan inmóviles, transfigurados por la luz, por el borde dorado de la fuente con la pupila oscura de *Cocoa l'Orange* en el centro.

Translator bio information

Nahuel Videla is a Sworn Translator in English graduated from the Universidad de Buenos Aires in 2013. He participated in the Literature Ireland Summer Translation Workshops for Spanish Translators of Irish Literature in 2022. He is currently a student of the Specialization Course in Literary Translation at the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras of the Universidad de Buenos Aires. He is a research assistant in the “Dialogues in Contemporary Irish Literature” research project based at the Universidad Nacional de La Pampa (Argentina), which explores the relationship between history, memory and trauma in the literary and cultural production of a selection of contemporary Irish writers as well as that resulting from the Irish Diaspora to Argentina. In it, he has translated two short stories by Mary O'Donnell (still in editing, along with others into Spanish), one of which is presented here.