

GRAN VÍA

FICTION

Stephen Marchand Fernández

Last year, I was invited to give a lecture on the ethics of translation. The event took place in Madrid. I delivered all my talk in English, which is not my mother tongue. Spanish is. It was all part of a private experiment: I wanted to see what it would feel like not to speak one's mother tongue in one's hometown. The odd thing is that many members of the Association of Translators and Interpreters knew that I was a native Spanish speaker, and yet none of them questioned why I kept speaking in English. Maybe they thought that I was crazy. Or pretentious. Maybe they were just being polite. Perhaps, after all the time I had lived abroad, they simply saw me as a foreigner or, as some would say, a stranger.

My years in Boston had certainly changed me both physically and emotionally. The long harsh winters had hardened my knuckles, dried my skin, and thinned my hair. I had become more withdrawn, colder, in a way. Many would think that this could explain my decision not to let my family know that I was in Madrid. That was a vital part of the experiment.

On my last day in Madrid, I happened to walk by the Thyssen Museum on my way back to the hotel. There was an exhibit by the Spanish painter Antonio López. "What a pity," I thought as I entered the first room. "Had I come here before my lecture, I would have incorporated one or two notes about painting as a means of translation." The exhibit left me mulling over various ideas. I bought three postcards of the same *Gran Vía* painting in the souvenir shop, left the museum, found a quiet bar, sat at a table, and started scribbling some notes on the back of the postcards. I stopped as soon as I realized that I had written most words in Spanish. "Damn it," I mumbled. "I've ruined the experiment." But I hadn't really spoken my mother tongue,

had I? I had only written in it. Appeased, I kept annotating more thoughts. Here's an English translation I made a few weeks after my return to Boston.

The city I left is hard to read. Its yellowed clues hide under dust.

Today I saw a painting of that city, the city I left. Many of the buildings portrayed are grey. I know that greyness, it's made of grime and pigeon shit. I've grown to love it.

As I stepped closer to the painting, I noticed a red street sign with a luring effect.

Do you know what red does to a bull? It becomes the bull's eye.

The Spanish word "rojo" contains the word "eye."

"Rojo" is redder than "red." The English word "dust," however, does a much better job than its Spanish counterpart. Its short, gruff sound encapsulates to perfection the thickness of powdery particles suspended in Madrid's dry air. "Dust" quickly becomes itchy in the palate, which is the exact feeling you get the moment you step out of Barajas airport and breathe. If you are a mouth breather, that is.

Translation is an imperfect measurement. And so is longing.

"Long;" too short a word for the weight it carries.

This painting by Antonio López presents a street with no definite length. Not just any street, but one of Madrid's main arteries. It plunges straight into the viewer's heart.

I just realized that each viewer happens to be an ever-changing translation of the painter himself.

I stood in front of the painting for at least 30 minutes, completely absorbed. It's not very big: 90 cm wide by 90 cm high. We use inches in the United States. "We" ... The language we use without always noticing it.

In any case, after staring at the painting for some time, I felt haunted by an irrational fear. I thought that if I were to turn around, I would see nothing but a barren land. The whole city of Madrid gone. Then I heard someone behind me whisper some words in English: "Yes, yes, I know, you are too small to carry an entire city within. Yet language longs and you embody." I turned around, but there was no one there.

I stopped writing because the waiter wanted to take my order. I almost replied in Spanish but didn't. "A glass of red wine, please," I said. The waiter could not understand me. I insisted at a slower pace, but his body immediately stiffened. The whole experiment was making me feel silly, even cruel. I thought of ending it right there, when someone sitting at a table behind me said: "Póngale un tinto al señor." The waiter nodded. I turned around wanting to say "gracias" to the stranger but said "thank you" instead.

A few minutes after landing at Logan Airport, it finally dawned on me: I had carried out the strangest of experiments. It is one thing to play around with language, even one's mother tongue, but not visiting my family seemed inexplicable and morally wrong. Yet, I had done it. "The things one does," I thought, "to measure distance and bring it closer to one's body."