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Joey Benevento March 24, 2017

An Original English Translation of Carlos Fuentes's "Calixta Brand" With Critical Introduction

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Abstract
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"Calixta Brand," a 36-page short story from Carlos Fuentes's 2004 collection *Inquieta compañia*, has never been published in English translation. The first chapter of this thesis contrasts Fuentes's overall reputation as one of Mexico's greatest authors with the general disregard for his 21st-century works, and then explains why "Calixta Brand" merits the attention of English-language readers. By examining points of contact among "Calixta Brand," Fuentes's earlier work, literary works by other authors, religious tradition, and social and political conflicts, the chapter not only signals the story's complexity, but also introduces many of the issues inherent in its translation. The second chapter of the thesis articulates and justifies my translation strategy. It explains the differences between foreignizing and domesticating translation, especially as advocated by Lawrence Venuti and Anthea Bell, respectively, and then explains my decision to combine the two methods, against the advice of Friedrich Schleiermacher. In particular, it highlights aspects of the story that demand a foreignizing translation due to their deliberate attention to cultural difference, and aspects that require domestication to convey complex emotional dynamics, wordplay, or poetry. The third chapter focuses on a handful of specific translation decisions, explaining translation challenges that required an extra measure of ingenuity. The fourth and final chapter is the English translation itself.

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Calixta in Context: Background and Justification for My Translation

Note: Translated titles in square brackets represent published English translations. Translated titles in only parentheses represent books that were never published in English translation.

The early work of Carlos Fuentes (1928-2012) established him as one of the greatest Mexican authors, yet his last few works have been virtually ignored. Born in Panama City, Panama to a Mexican diplomat, Fuentes spent his childhood in a variety of capital cities, studied at the University of Mexico in Mexico City and the Institute of Advanced International Studies in Geneva, and then became a diplomat himself. However, beginning with his first novel, *La región más transparente* (1958 [*Where the Air is Clear,* 1960]), Fuentes's writing became popular enough for him to work exclusively as an author. Fuentes is known for such internationally successful novels as *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962 [*The Death of Artemio Cruz,* 1964]) and *Aura* (1962, translated 1965), in addition to collections of short stories such as *Cantar de ciegos* (1964, *Song of the Blind*) and *Agua quemada* (1981 [*Burnt Water*, 1983]), nonfiction works such as *El espejo enterrado* (1992 [*The Buried Mirror,* 1992]), and a handful of theatrical scripts and screenplays. A central figure in Latin America's literary "Boom" of the mid-20th century, he ranks with authors like Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Gabriel García Márquez, and though he never won a Nobel Prize, he did receive his native Mexico's highest award, the Belisario Domínguez Medal of Honor, along with the highest award in Spanish-language literature, the Miguel de Cervantes Prize. Fuentes's works have been translated into some two dozen languages (Rama), and are respected everywhere from Japan to Romania, where literary critic Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu calls him "'un scriitor inevitabil' (he means an essential writer of our times, but he uses the more expressive adjective of 'unavoidable')" (Dumitrescu, 309). The following question,

then, becomes equally “unavoidable”: why has the United States, Fuentes's next-door neighbor, failed to translate some of his later work?

In truth, the last decade or so of Fuentes's writing won little prestige even in Mexico. Few journals reviewed it, and most reviews that were published ranged from lukewarm to scathing. In his introduction to *Carlos Fuentes: La crítica como celebración* (2009), a slim volume that scrapes together some positive readings of Fuentes's later work, Enrique Flores Durán asserts that “La crítica ha guardado silencio en muchas obras de Fuentes, por desidia, ninguneo o por envidia” (Durán, 12). He goes on to quote Mario Vargas Llosa as saying that attacking Carlos Fuentes is Mexico’s national sport (12). Another quote, from novelist Pedro Ángel Palou, asserts that “Cada quien tiene al Carlos Fuentes que se merece. En México, gazmoños y pacatos, envidiosos y ególatras nos han impedido leer sus últimas obras con desparpajo. Con placer” (11). Both writers seem to believe the receptivity for Fuentes’s writing, and not the quality of the writing itself, has declined.

In spite of these few sympathetic voices, the scorn for Fuentes's later works seems widespread. Professor Lisa Dillman says that casual mockery of Fuentes had become more or less routine in scholarly circles; her peers were just as likely to call Fuentes sexist, to raise an eyebrow at his erotic portrayals of older women, or to say he thought of himself as Cristóbal Nonato (Christopher Unborn), titular savior of Mexico in his 1987 novel, as to give his recent writing much serious consideration (Dillman). His reviewers often adopt a similar tone. The title of one review of his novel *Adán en Edén* (2009, [*Adam in Eden,* 2012]), “Una broma” (“A Joke”), is meant to signal the nature of the novel, but just as well describes the review itself, which says the book's “184 páginas son, para decirlo claramente, desafortunadas,” and that when a readers finish the book, they will wonder whether some pages are missing (Carrión, 47). A

review of *La voluntad y la fortuna* (*Will and Fortune*, 2008), recounts the reviewer's dismay at having been assigned a 552-page Fuentes novel, but concedes that pages 119–125 were enjoyable. Both seem to think Fuentes's writing had become lazy, clumsy, and not worth the effort of reading.

"Calixta Brand," a 36-page short story in the 2004 collection *Inquieta compañía* (*Restless company*) belies the complaints leveled against Fuentes. It rewards close reading with subtle linguistic games, layered allusion, and complex, pertinent social commentary. The story is rich in intertextualities ranging from a carefully misattributed poetic quote to a covert, inverted retelling of *Calisto y Melibea.* It borrows from the traditions of Christianity, classical mythology, and Islam. It explores the conflicted Moorish, Spanish and indigenous sources of Mexico's architecture, language, and culture. It examines how Puebla relates to the rest of Mexico, how Mexico relates to the United States, and how the West relates to the Middle East. It contains, in short, more than enough to merit the attention of English-language readers.

Yet for all its complexity, "Calixta Brand" ought to interest even a casual reader as a suspenseful, idiosyncratic tale of love gone wrong, in which pent-up tensions and latent supernatural elements erupt in sudden plot developments. A brief plot synopsis of the story will not only demonstrate its singularity, but also provide context for this paper's later discussions of specific scenes. The first-person narrator of "Calixta Brand," Esteban, recounts and overthinks his interactions with the titular character, a Minnesota native he marries early in the story. At first he is happy in their marriage, and always looks forward to returning from work to the mansion and the walled garden that he inherited and that she tends. However, the revelation that Calixta writes fiction in his absence fills Esteban with unease, which gradually develops into bitter resentment. When an attack of spastic paralysis renders Calixta an invalid, Esteban

neglects and mistreats her, eventually committing a shocking act of abuse that prompts an acquaintance of his to pressure him into hiring a nurse, Miguel Asmá, to care for her. The story ends when Miguel, having restored Calixta's quality of life, suddenly sprouts angelic wings and bears her up into the firmament.

Literary critics have written little about *Inquieta compañía,* but the collection does figure in some essays that trace overarching patterns in Fuentes's work. It is especially relevant to Fuentes's writings in the Gothic genre. Ricardo Gutiérrez-Mouat asserts that "Fuentes is the most Gothic of all major Latin American writers" (Gutiérrez-Mouat, 297), and that the stories in *Inquieta compañía* "amount to the most focused and sustained exploration of the Gothic genre to be found anywhere in the author's *oeuvre"* (298). He argues that although scholars often ignore Fuentes's Gothic strain because they see the Gothic as a parodic, less-than-"respectable" genre, authors like Cortázar and Fuentes "de-automatize" Gothic stereotypes by bringing them into everyday contexts, and into stories "profoundly involved in the process of cultural modernization" (298). The appearance of an uncanny, supernatural Other in so many of Fuentes's fictions "even rehearses a twisted reading of the great Mexican theme of solitude, as indicated by the recurrence of the key term *compañia* in stories and novels leading up to" *Inquieta compañia* (299). Julio Ortega speaks in similar terms, saying "la 'inquieta compañía' es también la del Otro que nos acompaña" (Ortega, 40).

In Calixta Brand, then, Esteban falls victim to the sort of accompanied solitude Gutiérrez-Mouat and Ortega describe. His routine physical proximity to his wife Calixta does not translate to emotional closeness, and their frequent conversations fail to foster mutual understanding. Esteban complains of Calixta engaging in monologue when the two of them converse (Fuentes, 134), and seems to feel closer to his deceased mother, with whom he claims to hold dialogue

(142) than to his living wife. Esteban makes his inner life most accessible, though, to neither his wife nor his mother nor any of his friends, but to the reader. The story's very narrative form serves to highlight Esteban's solitude. Heavy on exposition and light on scene and dialogue, the story shows Esteban's absorption in his own musings and insecurities, which he is better able to ponder alone than to voice to Calixta. When Calixta's paralysis takes away her power of speech, then, it only makes her and Esteban's inability to communicate more concrete.

Gutiérrez-Mouat's essay does make brief mention of "Calixta Brand," calling it "a story of not one but two haunted portraits" (310). One of said portraits is an old painting which gradually reveals the features of Calixta's caretaker Miguel Asmá. The other, a photograph of Calixta, evokes *The Picture of Dorian Gray* without copying it exactly. Rather than aging while Calixta remains young and then reverting to youth when she dies, her image ages congruently with her, until its complete disappearance announces her husband Esteban's death. Gutiérrez-Mouat also cites the story's focus on a victimized heroine trapped in an old mansion, and its "Oriental air [which] evokes one of the earliest Gothic romances, Beckford's *Vathek"* (310). I would add—and Ortega notes—that the presence of Calixta as a mute invalid in the latter half of the story makes her a sort of "cadáver que no cesa de morir" (Ortega, 40), an undead presence who mixes bodily helplessness with the threat of supernatural power.

Another recurring Fuentes trope, that of incestuous desire for an older woman, also resurfaces in "Calixta Brand." The protagonists of "Las dos Elenas" ("The Two Elenas") and "Vieja moralidad" ("Old Morality"), two stories from *Cantar de ciegos*, engage in sexual affairs with their mother-in-law and aunt, respectively, while the protagonist of *Zona Sagrada* (1967, [*Holy Place,* 1972]) is sexually obsessed with his movie-star mother. In "Calixta Brand," Esteban's relationship to his mother occupies a less central role, but he does seem think of her in

romantic terms. When Calixta makes him happy, he remembers his late mother's comparative harshness; when she upsets him, he remembers his mother's kindness. His tendency to compare the two comes to a fine point with his blurted wish that Calixta had died instead of his mother (Fuentes, 143). His outburst immediately precedes Calixta's sudden paralysis, leaving the reader to wonder whether his prayer has been, in a way, granted. Calixta's quickly declining health, wilting appearance, and graying hair transform her into a figure more maternal, even grandmotherly, than youthfully erotic.

If Fuentes's interests in the Gothic and in Oedipal desire became apparent early in his career, though, his concern with the Middle East became apparent only shortly before "Calixta Brand." His *Contra Bush* (*Against Bush*, 2004), a collection of essays written in the years 2000–2004, criticizes the George W. Bush administration, in particular for its handling of the terrorism crisis in the Middle East. In his introduction to the collection, he asserts that terrorism is rooted not just in religious fundamentalism, "sino en la miseria económica, la opresión política, y la percepción distorsionada en parte, pero en parte también certera, que el débil puede tener del fuerte" (Fuentes, 10), thus arguing that the blame for terrorism belongs not only to those who perpetrate it, but also to the powerful, oppressive countries that provoke it. He maintains that to praise the clash of civilizations is to forget that "todos somos descendientes de *encuentros* de civilizaciones" (Fuentes, 9), suggesting that culture is not founded on military victories, but on peaceful interactions. He believes we must respect the differences and recognize the similarities among what he calls "las grandes culturas humanas" (9). The narrator of "El amante del teatro," the first story in *Inquieta compañía,* condemns the invasion of Iraq even more forcefully. He says it convinced him that the 21st century will be worse than the 20th, "sus crímenes mayores, e impunes los criminales" (Fuentes, 25). Fuentes's warning not to view the Middle East as an

adversary is far from outdated. In a country whose newly elected president has repeatedly called for a ban on Muslim immigration, the warning has become more urgent than ever.

"Calixta Brand" condenses the global question of interactions between Western, Christian culture and Middle Eastern, Islamic culture to a personal scale. Esteban, on one hand, recognizes his own culture's immense debt to the Middle East. He describes the heavy Moorish influence on the architecture of his estate, and tells Calixta that half of the Spanish vocabulary comes from Arabic. Yet in his interactions with Miguel Asmá, the Arabic, Muslim nurse and gardener who comes to tend his ailing wife and his overgrown garden, Esteban shows nothing but disrespect. When Miguel tells him he reads works by medieval, Muslim authorities on medicine, Esteban dismisses him as a "curandero" (153). When Miguel tries to explain how Muslims and Jews share "el destino ambulante, la fuga, el desplazamiento," Esteban interrupts to call both peoples "vagos" (152-153), thus associating their wanderings with laziness and homelessness. Esteban's disdain for Miguel is unjustified; Calixta, the garden, and Esteban's whole household prosper under his care. Esteban's position becomes even less defensible when, at the end of the story, Miguel reveals his angelic wings and carries a newly young, healthy Calixta into the heavens. The "llamado Miguel Asmá" (160), then, seems to be archangel Mikhail, who in Muslim tradition "is responsible for preservation [of life], rain and the plants of the earth (al-Suyuti, 118), which are the very tasks Miguel fulfills as gardener and nurse. Yet his close association with Islam does not separate him from the Catholic version of the archangel Michael, who is responsible for escorting the souls of the faithful to heaven ("St. Michael the Archangel"). "Calixta Brand," then, highlights Islam's long traditions of peace and healing, shows the wrongheadedness of those who disrespect it, and highlights the overlap and mutual influence between Western and Middle Eastern cultures.

Such sympathetic portrayals of Islam are not the norm in the US, even among translated works by Middle Eastern authors. Postcolonial scholar Shouleh Vatanabadi explains that American publishers often choose to translate precisely those texts that coincide best with stereotypes of the Middle East, and that "the narrative of women as victims in the Middle East outside any complexity, voice, agency, time, and space is the primary factor determining selection for translation and publication" (Vatanabadi, 800). "Calixta Brand" not only contradicts US stereotypes of Islam, but also contradicts our stereotypes of Mexico. Though some US residents respect and admire aspects of Mexico's culture—thanks in part to internationally acclaimed Mexican authors like Fuentes—negative US stereotypes of Mexico persist. Yet whereas many associate Mexico with destitute workers desperate to escape into the US, Fuentes portrays a wealthy executive whose wife, fleeing the cold of Minnesota, emigrated to Mexico. A wealthy Mexican himself, Fuentes may not have thought twice about portraying one, but intentionally or not he has inverted the narrative a stereotypical US reader would expect.

If Miguel's name betrays his archangelic identity, the name "Calixta Brand" hints at enough intertextualities to provide topics for a half dozen essays. Here, I will address them briefly. "Brand" seems to allude to the Henrik Ibsen play of that name, which the protagonist of "El amante del teatro" discusses. Yet while the ardently Protestant Brand in Ibsen refuses to flee the cold of Norway even to save his son's life, Calixta gladly leaves Minnesota, and gladly accepts the care of a Muslim angel. "Calixta" alludes, first of all, to the nymph Callista of Greco-Roman mythology, whom Jupiter carries into the heavens, just as Miguel Asmá does with Calixta. Secondly, the protagonist of Kate Chopin's "The Storm," Calixta, cheats on her husband with no negative consequences, whereas Esteban flies into a rage when Calixta Brand so much as writes about adultery. Most importantly, though, "Calixta" echoes Fernando de Rojas's

Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea, which, like "Calixta Brand," prominently features a walled garden. If Fuentes means to reference *Calisto y Melibea*, though, he does so by inverting it. Calixta is female, and Miguel, whose name comes closest to "Melibea" of any character in the story, is male. Calixta is the one confined to the garden—physically paralyzed rather than societally repressed—and Miguel the one who comes to visit. And unlike Calisto, who falls out of the garden to his death and, since he had not been reconciled after his illicit affair, probable damnation, Calixta ascends out of the garden, apparently bound for heaven. Fuentes's use of allusion is effective not simply because it adds layers of meaning by helping readers connect "Calixta Brand" to other literature, but because almost every allusion inverts its source. Rather than mimicking or repeating other authors, Fuentes invokes them in order to contradict them, and to advance an original message.

The subtlety and nuance of Fuentes's literary allusions contrast with the clumsy directness of Calixta's and Esteban's references to literature. In their overblown discussions of writing, they mention familiar names like Montesquieu, Quevedo, Dickinson, Góngora, Shakespeare, and Cervantes, usually to make hasty generalizations about their work. One of Calixta's very first lines contains a paraphrase that she seems to think comes from Anne Bradstreet, but that actually comes from Edward Taylor. Her other statements about literature are often so abstract they become incomprehensible. Fuentes, in spite of portraying Calixta as admirable in most ways, does not give her cleverness to match her kindness and patience. She is a less intelligent reader and writer than she, or even the insecure and spiteful Esteban, thinks she is.

This introduction has signaled many but by no means all of the complexities of "Calixta Brand" that deserve deeper analysis. What I have presented constitutes a good entry point for an

attempt to study the story's multitude of nuances. Furthermore, it shows how important it is for "Calixta Brand" to be translated. First of all, the story manipulates an elaborate enough set of intertextualities to merit a great deal of scholarly analysis, yet remains engaging enough to interest a more casual reader. Any project that makes it available to more readers, then, is productive. Secondly, though, the story advances social and political messages relevant to a US, English-speaking audience in particular, undercutting the stereotypes of Mexico and of the Middle East that many US residents hold. Finally, I hope that my translation of "Calixta Brand" will prompt readers to stop neglecting the last decade or more in the career of one of Latin America's great authors, and to begin studying his later writings with some measure of the attention and respect they devoted to the rest of his work.

Translation Theory and My Translation Strategy

In an 1813 essay, Friedrich Schleiermacher said that a translator either "leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible, and moves the author towards him" (Schleiermacher, 9). Ever since, translation scholars have debated where on the spectrum between those two extremes a good translation should fall. Those who prefer to bring the reader to the author advocate "foreignizing" translation, which strives to confront the reader with unfamiliar elements of a foreign language and culture, while those who prefer to bring the author to the reader support "domesticating" translation, which attempts to translate into language idiomatic and familiar enough to seem like a target-language original. Yet Schleiermacher's essay prompted a debate that it had actually aimed to resolve. Scholars who cite the above passage sometimes fail to acknowledge that later in the essay, Schleiermacher wholeheartedly throws in his lot with foreignization. He asserts that "the real aim of all translation, the unadulterated enjoyment of foreign works within the limits of the possible," cannot be achieved by a domesticating method "that insists on breathing the spirit of a language alien to it into the translated work" (26). In his opinion, then, the author's language inherently affects the "spirit" of the text, and the translator is responsible for illuminating that original spirit in the target language. Above all, he condemns any combination of the two methods, which he maintains would result in "an even more clearly repulsive and confusing mixture of translation and imitation that cruelly bounces the reader back and forth like a ball between the foreign world and his own" (26). It is in bold-faced defiance of Schleiermacher, then, that my translation of "Calixta Brand" attempts to combine the two strategies.

The foreignizing and domesticating aspects of my translation are inspired, respectively, by Lawrence Venuti and Anthea Bell, who among contemporary translators and translation scholars best epitomize Schleiermacher's opposing methods. Venuti complains that most contemporary English-language translations maintain an "illusion of transparency" (Venuti, 1). Reviewers praise translations, he says, which read so fluently as to make readers feel as if they are reading the original work, and not a translation at all. In his opinion, such an illusion is dangerous, because it "masks an insidious domestication of foreign texts" (16–17), creating the impression that a foreign author's statements can be expressed clearly and unproblematically in English, when in reality the statements have been altered to conform with the English-language reader's expectations. To present a foreign work in familiar English erases the culture of the source text and reaffirms the dominance of English, in a manner he describes as "imperialistic abroad and xenophobic at home" (17). Venuti believes a translation should instead heighten the reader's awareness of cultural and linguistic difference, accentuating elements of a work that lack an idiomatic English equivalent. Thus, he believes foreignizing translation "can be a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism, in the interest of democratic geopolitical relations" (20), because it destroys the illusion that Anglo-American patterns of language and thought are, or should be, accepted worldwide.

If Venuti believes domestication dominates commercial translation, Bell believes foreignization dominates translation theory. In what seems a direct response to Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility*, she says: "I am an unrepentant, unreconstructed adherent of the school of invisibility, and cannot change an honestly held opinion because it is out of fashion" (59). What Venuti criticizes, she encourages, asserting that a translator's job is to maintain "the illusion…that the reader is reading not a translation but the real thing" (59). She insists, however,

that the illusion need not "deprive readers of the foreignness of the original text, something that the advocates of visible translation are extremely anxious to preserve" (60). She believes familiar language is still capable of illuminating an unfamiliar culture, which makes itself known not just in a work's diction, but in its representation of plot, of setting, or even of humor.

Venuti and Bell both make convincing arguments, but neither of their strategies is feasible for the entirety of "Calixta Brand." For example, it would be inadvisable—if not impossible—to create the illusion that the translated text was an English original, when the story accentuates linguistic difference even in the source text. The story's Spanish is interrupted by snippets of French and, more importantly, English, a language to which the Minnesotan Calixta occasionally reverts. To leave those statements in English without in any way marking them would be to lose the linguistic contrast which Fuentes deliberately included in the story, and which serves to highlight Calixta's displacement in Mexico. To preserve the contrast while maintaining the illusion of an English original, one would have to resort to something as extreme as translating the lines into Spanish, which would only be justifiable in a complete cultural transplantation that rendered Esteban Minnesotan and Calixta Mexican. Thus, the best option is to point out which lines Calixta says "in English," thus signaling her displacement, but also inevitably reminding the reader that most of the text is translated from Spanish.

Furthermore, the foreign Calixta does not intrude into a culturally or linguistically simple Mexico. Esteban knows very well that Mexico's identity is tied only in part to Spain, that European, Native American, and Arabic elements all figure in Mexico's culture, and that secular, pagan, Catholic, and Islamic beliefs all find footholds in Mexico's religious consciousness. He and Calixta discuss the strong impression Arabic has made on the Spanish language, and the whole story makes heavy use of words whose *al-* prefix betrays their Arabic origin. The art and

architecture of Esteban's estate are unmistakably Middle Eastern. One could argue, then, that even in the original Spanish the story is "foreignizing," since it refuses to portray Mexico as a unified entity, and instead shows it to be a conglomeration of elements all foreign to one another. Thus, "Calixta Brand" supports the observation of postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha that many countries no longer define their national identity in terms of a single, dominant culture, and instead acknowledge interactions among a variety of minority groups, creating "a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities" (Bhabha, 107). If my translation, then, leaves the reader feeling culturally displaced or disoriented, I will not have created unnecessary confusion where there was none, because even the source text highlighted the uneasy interactions among languages and cultures.

"Calixta Brand" also provides a valuable opportunity for US residents to see *themselves* as a cultural other. In one of Calixta's and Esteban's pompous literary discussions, she tells him, "no quiero escucharme siendo escuchado," meaning, in context, that she does not want to find out how people react to her writing. However, US readers of "Calixta Brand" will, as she says, hear themselves being heard, that is, they will have to opportunity to view a Mexican author's view of their own country. In the character of Calixta, Fuentes portrays his conception of the thought and behavior of a US resident. Although Calixta's US origin constitutes only one facet of her characterization, and although one character cannot encapsulate every facet of a nation's culture, the story frequently calls attention to Calixta's US identity. Part of what makes the story so inescapably and productively foreign for a US reader is that upon immigrating to Mexico, the tall, blonde, Northern, Protestant immigrant Calixta becomes exotic and profoundly Other. She is less culturally familiar to Esteban, in fact, than a Native American like his servant Hermenegilda or an Arab like Miguel Asmá. Thus, a foreignizing translation of "Calixta Brand" ought to, as

Venuti suggests, combat "cultural narcissism," especially because Esteban's mentions of the US never evince admiration. Rather than marveling that Calixta was willing to abandon her native country to marry him, or wondering whether she misses its culture or its economy, he usually discusses Calixta's previous home in half-joking references to its cold climate, which he believes she must have been glad to escape. Esteban discusses the US the way some U.S. residents discuss Canada: with vague amusement and overall indifference. "Calixta Brand" reminds US residents that even to our near neighbors our culture is of no central importance; we are one foreign country among many.

Part of my foreignizing strategy, then, is to avoid glossing elements of the story that assume a familiarity with Mexican culture. Translation scholar Maria Tymoczko, in an essay that compares post-colonial literature to literary translation, points out that just as no author can portray every facet of his or her culture in a single work, no translator can convey all the cultural and linguistic information in a source text. When "faced, for example, with a myth, custom, or economic condition presupposed by a text, but not located explicitly in it," a translator must decide whether to interrupt the narrative and explain the supposition, or to let it remain opaque to the target language reader (Tymoczko, 26). Often in "Calixta Brand," I opt for opacity. For example, when Esteban compares somebody to a well-known Mexican actor like Cantinflas, Arturo Soto Rangel, or Eduardo Arozamena, I do not gloss the reference. To portray the narrator, Esteban, as explicating the identity of the actors would be misleading, since in his culture they are already familiar. To culturally transpose the references and name Hollywood actors would be more foolish still, not only because Esteban's comparisons rely specifically on the actors he has chosen, but also because to do so would imply Esteban followed US cinema. I prefer to remind readers that Mexico has a robust cinematic tradition of its own—a tradition familiar to Fuentes's

source-language readers, but foreign and disorienting to US residents, who are reminded again that they are cultural outsiders to Esteban's world.

Aspects of the architecture of Esteban's estate will also remain opaque. Certain features of the estate lack recognizable English names because they are nearly absent from Anglo-American architecture. The *alfiz*, for example, a type of arched doorway, has entered English as an uncommon loan word, while *alfanjías*, a type of roof beam, are difficult to find even in a Spanish dictionary. Both terms come from Arabic, and share the *al-* prefix the story so accentuates, and both features owe their relevance in Mexican architecture to the Moorish influence on Spain. Rather than substituting loosely analogous architectural features that English-language readers would recognize, or describing the features in Esteban's narrative voice, my translation leaves the terms untranslated and unglossed. Thus, the words signal not only the Moorish origin of the features, but also the familiarity of an educated Mexican like Esteban with Moorish architecture; he presumes his audience already knows the terms. "Calixta Brand" illuminates the parallel that architect and scholar Felipe Hernández sees between architecture and translation, both of which he believes can show "the interaction between cultural fragments" (Hernández, 37). Esteban's estate shows the heterogeneity of Mexican culture, just as my translation aims to do.

Moments of opacity in the translated text become all the more justifiable when one considers what linguist and translation scholar Hans J. Vermeer would call its "skopos," or its purpose, which takes into account the intended audience. Vermeer discourages the unjustified pursuit of a single goal, such as literal accuracy, in every translation, and instead urges translators to consider each translation's target audience, and to determine which translation strategy would serve that audience best. As popular as some of Fuentes's fiction has become,

then, he remains a belletristic author, the core of whose readership likely expects and enjoys complex, difficult writing. Such readers, rather than becoming annoyed at cultural references they do not recognize, ought to appreciate the opportunity to research precisely the references Fuentes made, instead of accepting simpler but less accurate approximations. Writers of literary criticism in particular should be willing to exert extra effort in order to gain a more precise understanding of the source text. Furthermore, Tymoczko points out that "the greater the international reputation of an author, the greater the demands that can be placed upon an international audience" (29). Literal accuracy gains importance when readers, in their admiration for a particularly prestigious author such as Fuentes, wish to devote close attention and analysis to his every word.

By now I have made it more than clear how compelling I find Venuti's argument that foreignizing translation better illuminates cultural difference. However, to think of "Calixta Brand" exclusively in terms of the cultural information it carries would be a mistake. After all, the story is not a mere cultural artifact, nor is its sole purpose to articulate Mexico's identity. Instead, "Calixta Brand" is most immediately engaged with the complex, subtle interactions between one man and his wife. Therefore, while the foreignness of the story should capture the reader's attention, it need not monopolize it. When Venuti laments how reviewers judge translated texts only by their fluency, he implicitly admits what Bell directly argues: readers prefer a text that seems well-written and idiomatic in the target language. While I do not wish to create a persistent illusion that the story was never in Spanish, I do wish to avoid the impression that the story never made it all the way into English.

Some degree of domestication is especially necessary as a measure to preserve the tonal register of Esteban's and Calixta's statements, ensuring that their attitudes towards their

conversations and towards each other become clear. Their fluctuating affections are, after all, central to the plot of the story. Esteban overanalyzes every word Calixta says, finding spiteful and sinister subtexts in what seem like innocent statements, and thereby forcing the reader to wonder whether the narrator is perceptive or paranoid. Therefore, dialogue between the two of them is no place for calling attention to the original Spanish syntax, for using confusingly literal equivalents to the original Spanish vocabulary, or for calquing unfamiliar Spanish idioms. Even an active, engaged reader would be frustrated if forced to puzzle out linguistic irregularities in a passage already fraught with puzzling emotions. Therefore, my translation does not shy from grammatical transpositions that alter syntax or sentence structure, when such changes cut through some linguistic confusion and better imitate the emotions evident in the original. Cultural difference notwithstanding, speakers of any language should feel some familiarity with the complications that accompany romance.

In some few cases, I even elected to divide a long, hypotactic sentence into two shorter ones. The division of sentences seemed appropriate in the rare cases when sentences utilized complex structures which were still perfectly clear in Spanish, but could not be translated into a single English sentence without confusing and disorienting the reader. To introduce such confusion would be an unproductive alteration to the story. The difficulty of reading "Calixta Brand" resides in its allusiveness, in its highly biased narrator, and in its occasional temporal leaps, but rarely in linguistic details. Esteban's narrative voice is variable, but not especially idiosyncratic. Whether he speaks in a sentence fragment, a complete sentence containing more than fifty words, or a paragraph containing only two, the reader can easily comprehend the literal meaning of his statements. The only likely linguistic cause of disorientation appears at the very beginning of the story, when Esteban presents his dialogue with Calixta in the form of free

indirect discourse. The confusing use of free indirect discourse is easily reproduced in English. Therefore, I endeavor not to portray Esteban as employing difficult, confusing sentences when he communicates clearly—and in the overwhelming majority of cases, he does.

In other instances, domestication is less than ideal, but basically unavoidable. For example, Esteban's servant Hermenegilda speaks in what he claims is pure 16th-century Spanish. To translate her lines into 16th-century English is an imperfect solution, not only because English and Spanish have changed differently over the centuries, but because Spanish has as a rule changed less, and is purported to be more comprehensible to a contemporary speaker. However, to attempt to illuminate the way early modern Spanish differs from contemporary Spanish for readers who do not speak Spanish in the first place is impractical on the face of it. Translating Hermenegilda's lines into an easily comprehensible, quasi-Shakespearian dialect is certainly a domestication, since it associates Mexican characters with a tradition irrelevant to them. However, it does recreate the startling effect of archaic vocabulary appearing in a contemporary setting, without introducing any unnecessary confusion, and hence seems the least harmful solution. I also opt for domestication in translating the couplet Esteban quotes from traditional Mexican song "Los enanos." To leave it untranslated is a tempting option, since otherwise readers will have little opportunity to find the song from which it's excerpted. However, the couplet's lyrics relate to Esteban's metaphor comparing himself to a dwarf locked out of a castle, and that connection would be lost to casual English-speaking readers were the couplet not translated. Furthermore, the translated couplet adheres less literally to the Spanish original than most of the translated prose, in the attempt to use a meter that seems singsong in English, and to preserve the rhyme. Thus, the song maintains its nursery-rhyme-like childishness, further reflecting Esteban's embarrassment at his own immature behavior.

Schleiermacher denounces outright the mixture of foreignization and domestication, but in doing so he implies that the attempt to move the reader towards the author entails illuminating only the cultural and linguistic aspects of the author's identity. He fails to acknowledge the role domestication can play in communicating that which sets the author apart from other speakers of the same language, thus bringing the reader to the author "as much as possible." Many passages in the source text already call attention to cultural difference, and in such passages I privilege the preservation of said difference over any illusion of transparency. However, in most passages, the national and ethnic identities of characters are less important than their more unique, more immediate standpoints and situations. Having accepted the responsibility of showing my readers a culture not their own, I also see a need not to drag them away from an imaginative story into a linguistic or anthropological lesson. Bell suspects that between the schools of visibility and invisibility, "what may in theory appear a wide gap between them is often bridged in practice," and that regardless of his or her theoretical standpoint, "a good translator will produce a good translation" (66). A good translation, then, even as it betrays its provenance in a source language, should also manage to sound engaging, vivid, and generally well-written in the target language. My partly foreignizing, partly domesticating translation, then, shows not "repulsive and confusing mixture" (Schleiermacher, 26), but healthy balance.

My Strategy in Action: Selected Decisions of Detail

No single page of "Calixta Brand" is without translation challenges, and my strategy of blending foreignization and domestication forces me to engage in a constant balancing act. This section of my thesis, then, does not explain every difficult translation decision I made. Instead, it highlights passages that require more than routine creativity on the part of the translator, often due to some particularly clever wordplay on Fuentes's part which loses its cleverness if translated directly into English. What follows, then, are some of my cleverer solutions.

The only word in "Calixta Brand" that presented much difficulty on a purely lexical level was "alféizar." Every dictionary and every Spanish speaker I consulted agreed that the word meant "windowsill," which did not seem a plausible translation for any of the word's three appearances in the story. The first, part of a description of Esteban's walled garden, mentions "puertas derramadas en anchos muros de alféizar y marcos de madera en las ventanas" (Fuentes, 128), implying with the phrase "muros de alféizar" that "alféizar" is a material from which the walls are built. The second, "Calixta fue hallada bocabajo en el declive del alféizar" (143) means the "alféizar" must be large enough for Calixta to lie on it. The third, "el derrame del alféizar empezó a ocultarse detrás del crecimiento desordenado del jardín" (144), again places the "alféizar" not in the house, but in the garden, and makes confusing reference to its "derrame," or "spillage."

I made no progress in deciphering the word until finally Professor Devin Stewart suggested that the latter two uses, which mention the "declive" ("slope") and "derrame" ("spillage") of the "alféizar," could refer to the spot on the ground eroded by rainwater deflected off the "alféizar." He said the word "eavesdrop" originally referred to such an impression created

by water spilling off the eaves of a house. I checked the Oxford English Dictionary, which confirmed his claim; the noun actually predates its derivative verb by centuries.

Thus, I decided to translate "muro de alféizar" as "eaved wall," interpreting its grammatical construction as analogous to "silla de ruedas," which means not "chair made out of wheels," but "wheelchair." That the walls of a walled garden should have eaves actually makes perfect sense. The main purpose of garden walls is to regulate the climate inside, and Esteban's garden does so effectively enough for Esteban to wonder if Miguel Asmá has erased the distinctions among seasons (Fuentes, 157). In the semiarid climate of the Mexican Plateau, then, inward-facing eaves would serve to deflect extra rainwater into the garden. Furthermore, a simple search of "walled garden" on Google Images confirms that some of them employ eaved walls. In the word's latter two appearances, I translated both "declive del alféizar" and "derrame del alféizar" as simply "eavesdrop." Though I realize the word's noun form is unfamiliar to most English speakers, particularly curious readers will at least be able to look it up in a dictionary. If anything, then, the target-language version is less obscure, since readers of the original Spanish have no way of knowing what "alféizar" means in context, short of researching the passages as intensively as I did.

Two especially difficult translation decisions stemmed from Fuentes's calling attention to spelling. The first, Calixta's response to Esteban's mentioning the strong Arabic influence on Spanish vocabulary, read: "—Almohada, alberca, alcachofa—se adelantó ella, riendo—. Alfil…—culminó la enumeración, moviendo la pieza sobre el tablero" (Fuentes, 129) in the original Spanish. I translated it as: "'*Almohada, alberca, alcachofa.*' She laughingly rattled off the words for pillow, swimming pool, and artichoke, completing the enumeration with '*alfil*,' as she moved that piece, the bishop, across the chess board." On one hand, I thought it essential to

leave the Arabic-derived terms in Spanish, thus preserving their common *al-* prefix. That way, I avoid the impression that Calixta has memorized a list of Arabic-derived words, when in reality she need only know the Arabic origin of the *al-* prefix to name several such words. On the other hand, I thought it important to gloss the words in English, in order to show their both varied and commonplace nature. These words, unlike many *al-* words in the story, are not obscure architectural terms; they refer to familiar, everyday objects. The gloss appears outside Calixta's quote, to avoid the false impression that she is translating the words herself. I also specified that "*alfil"* referred to "that piece, the bishop," to clarify that it did not refer to the "chess board" mentioned in the same sentence.

The second passage that highlights spelling begins when Hermenegilda addresses Esteban as "su merced," prompting him to assert that people from Mexico's isolated mountain villages speak 16th-century Spanish. He says Hermenegilda "abundaba en 'su merced,' y 'mercar' y 'lo mesmo' y 'mandinga' y 'mandado'—para limitarme a sus emes" (Fuentes, 141). I translated that by saying she "was full of 'your grace,' 'goodwife,' 'gramercy,' 'gobelyn,' and 'gladsome,' just to name the 'g's." In this case, I judged the choice of "m" as an initial letter to be of little importance. While a high percentage of Arabic-derived words begin with *al-*, archaic Spanish does not rely disproportionately on the initial "m." Instead, the phrase "para limitarme a sus emes" implies that Esteban, if he wanted, could go on to name many other archaic words, beginning with many other letters, that Hermenegilda uses. He chooses "m" merely because Hermenegilda's use of "su merced" triggers the enumeration. I decided, then, that I would lose little by translating "su merced" as "your grace," and then listing archaic "g" words.

I privileged alliteration over the denotation of each word; the words in the source text seem chosen more or less at random. They come from a variety of parts of speech (three nouns,

an adjective, and a verb), so the words in my translation (three nouns, an adjective, and an interjection) do the same. One word, though, I did manage to translate almost directly. "Mandinga" refers, among other things, to demons, or imps. I replaced it with "gobelyn," an archaic version of "goblin." This particular word I do consider important, because it implies that the old-fashioned Hermenegilda might believe in the supernatural. Such a belief becomes justified later in the story, when Esteban's estate plays host to haunted portraits, a secret angel, and a river that springs from nowhere.

In two other cases, Fuentes begins a familiar Spanish idiom, only to derail it at the very last word. The less salient of the two instances occurs when Esteban describes the garden growing "a paso de hiedra" (Fuentes, 145), which I translated as "at a vine's pace." The conventional Spanish idiom would be "a paso de tortuga," that is, "at the pace of a turtle," or, more conventionally in English, "at a snail's pace." I decided to imitate the structure of the English idiom as closely as possible, as the source text does in Spanish. Translating "hiedra" directly as the uncountable noun "ivy" would have forced me to omit the word "a," so I changed it to the countable "vine." The resulting phrase still sounds unconventional, but the same is true of the original Spanish phrase.

Even less conventional is the instance when, having enumerated some of Miguel Asmá's frustrating actions, Esteban complains: "sentí que el tal Miguel me empezaba a llenar de piedritas los cojones" (Fuentes, 153). I translated the clause as "I felt like that Miguel was becoming a real thorn in my balls." I believe Esteban is playing with the idiom "una piedrita en el zapato," which translates to "a stone in one's shoe," an English idiom already, but more commonly phrased "a thorn in one's side." Rather than placing the stones in his shoes, though, Esteban places them far more uncomfortably in his "cojones," a colloquial word for "testicles."

Miguel's growing role in Esteban's household and influence over his maid and his wife, then, not only makes Esteban uncomfortable, but also emasculates him. The image of a thorn in the balls is equally startling, and equally unpleasant.

In another instance, Esteban uses an idiom for overt punning. When his gardener Ponciano tells him, "Don Miguel es un santo," he replies, "Ah, ¿sí? ¿A santo de que?" (Fuentes, 153). Ponciano's calling Miguel a saint sets up Esteban for his disdainful use of "¿a santo de qué?" an idiom meaning something like "why on earth?" It also serves as foreshadowing. Ponciano is not far off the mark, as Miguel is not a saint, but an angel. Lacking a saint-related expression of incredulity in English, I translated Ponciano's statement as "Don Miguel is sent from heaven," and Esteban's reply as "Is that so? What in heaven do you mean?" Thus, I maintained the pun, the skepticism, and the foreshadowing.

Other instances of wordplay required me not to search for an equivalent English idiom, but to translate more literally than I normally would. For example, when Esteban says: "convivieron en mi espíritu dos sentimientos contradictorios" (Fuentes, 132), I could have reasonably translated "convivieron en mi espíritu" as "shared control of my mind." However, "convivieron" calls to mind the "convivencia" or, as it is termed in English, "coexistence," of Christians, Jews and Muslims in medieval Spain. Such an allusion is appropriate in a story so concerned with the Islamic influence on the Spanish-speaking world. Furthermore, "espíritu" resonates with ghostly words such as "rival incorpórea" and "espectro" on the following page. Therefore, I chose the more literal translation: "two contradictory feelings coexisted in my spirit."

Similarly, when Esteban says of Pedro Ángel Palou's suggestion that he hire Miguel Asmá: "no sé por qué tan 'saludable' propuesta me llenó de cólera" (Fuentes, 146), it seems most

idiomatic to translate "saludable" as "healthy" and "cólera" as "anger." However, the quotes Esteban places around "saludable" call attention to its multiple meanings of "beneficial" or even "wise" (Palou's idea is a good one) and "healthy" (hiring a nurse will improve Calixta's health). Therefore, I opt for the cognate "salutary," despite its less common usage in English, because it encompasses the above meanings. "Cólera," for its part, is important for evoking the four humors, as does the "bilis" mentioned on page 143. The allusion to humors is relevant in a story that later makes mention of medieval medical authorities. I translated "cólera," then, to "choler," which evokes the humors while still denoting anger.

Finally, one of my most difficult tasks was translating the two quotations Fuentes takes from preexisting poetry. Calixta speaks the first quotation, attributing the following questions to Anne Bradstreet: "¿quién llenó al mundo del encaje fino de los ríos como verdes listones…?, ¿Quién hizo del mar su orilla…?" (126). Her quotation, though, more than it resembles anything Bradstreet wrote, resembles the following lines from Edward Taylor's "God's Determinations Touching His Elect:" "Who Lac'de and Fillitted the earth so fine,/ With Rivers like Green Ribbons Smaragdine?/ Who made the Sea's its Selvage…" (Taylor, 31). The option exists, then, of replacing Calixta's questions with a direct quotation from Taylor, but that strategy is less than ideal, for three reasons. First, Calixta does not seem to translate the original faithfully—she completely omits "fillitted," "smaragdine," and the "selvage" metaphor. Second, it seems unlikely that Calixta would have the quotation memorized when she cannot so much as correctly name its author. Third, quoting such an archaic poem would create the false impression that Calixta was quoting it in English, or at the least raise questions as to what sort of Spanish could approximate such archaic vocabulary.

I did, however, bring my English translation closer to Taylor's original than Calixta's Spanish version. It reads: "who laced the world with rivers like green ribbons? Who hemmed the sea in with a shore?" "Laced," I decided, is better than "filled with lace," because only the Spanish lack of a "lace" verb necessitated that slightly clumsier wording in Calixta's version. My translation also reintroduces the "selvage" metaphor, paraphrasing it with the idiom "hem in," which refers, as "selvage" does, to the border of a piece of fabric, but also means "to enclose." In exploiting the opportunities English affords to paraphrase the quotation more closely, I give any reader who happens to be familiar with Puritan poetry the opportunity to recognize Calixta's misattribution of the quote. Her error becomes especially significant when one considers Esteban's preoccupation with his and Calixta's relative levels of intelligence. Literature is supposedly her area of expertise, yet one of the first sentences she utters proves her to be less knowledgeable than she thinks.

Fuentes's second poetic quotation comes from traditional Mexican song "Los enanos." My section on translation strategy already discusses my goals for this couplet, which include rhyme, singsong meter, and the childish tone of a nursery rhyme. Rather than justifying my goals again, then, I will explain how I accomplished them. In Spanish, the couplet read "Ya los enanos ya se enojaron/ porque sus nanas los pellizcaron" (139). I translated it as: "The little dwarves cried angry tears/ When granny pinched their little ears." Though "tears" and "ears," the basis for my rhyme, depart from the literal meaning of the source text, tonally they suit the couplet. The source text specifies only that the dwarves' grandmothers (or, depending how one translates "nanas," their older sisters, little girls, or lullabies) pinched them, however, grandmothers stereotypically pinch their grandchildren on the cheeks or ears, so the mention of ears does not conflict with the meaning of the original. It merely narrows it. The same is true of changing the

more general “se enojaron” (“became angry”) to the more specific “cried angry tears.”

The dwarves’ crying also helps deride the triviality of their anger. Esteban quotes the song, after all, both to mock his neighbors for complaining about his rudeness, and to mock himself for acting like a “niño berrinchudo” (“bratty kid”) towards Calixta. In the source text, the repetition of “ya” contributes to the couplet’s taunting tone. To translate that directly as a repeated “already” would be cumbersome and confusing; instead, I twice used the word “little,” which is belittling in its own right, but becomes more so when repeated. Finally, I kept the lines short, at just eight syllables each, to help them sound trivial and childish. A more direct translation of “porque sus nanas” would read “because their grannies,” but the line “because their grannies pinched their little ears” would be iambic pentameter, a prestigious meter English-language readers likely associate with Shakespeare. Simplifying the phrase to “when granny,” then, cuts the line down to iambic tetrameter, which one can more easily imagine a child memorizing and repeating.

Having introduced and justified my project, explained the story’s context and analyzed its content, articulated my translation strategy and shown some examples of its implementation, I now present the translation itself.

Calixta Brand

Naturally, for Pedro Ángel Palou

When I met Calixta Brand, both of us were students. I was studying Economics at MAUP (The Meritorious Autonomous University of Puebla), a secular stronghold in a conservative, Catholic city. She was a student at the Cholula Summer School.

We met beneath the arches of the colonnades on the main square of Puebla. One afternoon I noticed the beautiful girl with light brown hair, almost blonde, parted in the middle and nearly eclipsing her intensely blue gaze. I liked the way she brushed aside, with a quick movement of her hand, the lock that kept falling between her eyes and her reading. As if she were shooing a fly.

She read intensely. With the same intensity that I observed her. I lifted my gaze and brushed aside the black lock that fell onto my forehead. This mimicry made her laugh. I returned her smile, and in a moment we were sitting together, each of us in front of a cup of coffee.

What was she reading?

The poems of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, of New Spain, and those of her colonial contemporary in New England, Anne Bradstreet.

“They are two female angels of poetry,” she said. “Two inquisitive poets.”

“Two old busybodies,” I said in an attempt at humor.

“No. Listen,” Calixta responded seriously, “Sor Juana with her soul divided, her soul in confusion. Reason? Passion? Who does Sor Juana belong to? And Anne Bradstreet asking herself, who laced the world with rivers like green ribbons? Who hemmed the sea in with a shore?”

No, seriously, what was she studying?

“Language. Spanish. Comparative Literature.”

What was I studying?

“Economics. Economic 'science,' to put it pompously.”

“*The dismal science,*” she declaimed in English.

“Carlyle said that,” I put in. “But before that Montesquieu called it 'the science of human happiness.'”

“The mistake is to call our experience of something unpredictable 'science,'” said Calixta Brand, who only then introduced herself as such, that blonde with long hair, neck, arms and legs, a languid but penetrating gaze, and quick wit.

We began to see each other frequently. I was delighted to reveal to Calixta the joys of Puebla’s cooking, and the altars, façades and courtyards of the oldest permanent Spanish city in Mexico. The capital—“*Mexico City?*” Calixta asked in English—was built on the rubble of the Aztec city Tenochtitlan. Puebla de los Ángeles was founded in 1531 by Franciscan monks, in a grid pattern—I smiled—that let it avoid the chaotic urban nomenclatures of Mexico City, with twenty Juárez Avenues and ten Carranza Streets, following instead the logical plan of the compass rose: north and south, east and west.

Finally I took her to see the sumptuous Baroque Chapel at my own university, and there I asked her to marry me. If not, what would the little *gringa* be going back to? She pretended to shiver. To Minnesota's twin cities, Minneapolis and St. Paul, where in the winter nobody can walk on streets whipped by icy winds, and you need to take covered walkways from one building to another. There is a lake that fills up with more ice than the sun can melt.

“What do you want to be, Calixta?”

“Something impossible.”

“What, darling?”

“I don't dare say it.”

“Not even to me? I'm already a graduate in economics. See how easy it is? What about you?”

“No complete experience exists. So I'm going to give an account of the partial.”

“I don't follow you.”

“I'm going to write.”

Well, she never lied to me. Now, twelve years later, I can't deceive myself. Now, watching her sitting hour after hour in the garden, I can't tell myself “she deceived me...”

Before, my young wife used to smile.

“Share my happiness, Esteban. Make it yours, the way I make your success mine.”

Was it true? Wasn't it she who was deceiving me?

I didn't ask myself questions during those first years of our marriage. I had the good fortune of getting a job with Volkswagen, and of climbing quickly up the company's corporate ladder. I admit now that I had little time to give Calixta the attention she deserved. She did not reproach me for it. She was very intelligent. She had her books, her papers, and she welcomed me tenderly every night. She cared for and restored with immense love the house that I inherited from my parents, the Durán-Mendizábals, in the countryside near the settlement of Huejotzingo.

The location is beautiful. It is practically at the foot of the Iztaccíhuatl volcano, “the sleeping woman,” whose white, recumbent body, watched over eternally by Popocatépetl, “the smoking mountain,” seems close enough to touch. Huejotzingo changed from an Indian village into a Spanish settlement around 1529, shortly after the conquest of Mexico was completed, and

it reflects the constructive fury of the energetic Extremadurans who subdued the Aztec empire, but also the Moorish indolence of the gentle Andalusians who accompanied them.

My country house flaunts that noble past. The façade is made of stone, with an Arabic *alfiz* towering over the doorframe, a courtyard with a well and a stone cross in the center, doors scattered on wide, eaved walls, and wooden frames on the windows. Inside, a network of *alfanjías* crossed with beams forms the frame of the ceiling in the spacious living room. The kitchen is furnished with Talavera tiles. A hallway leads to the slightly damp bedrooms on the second floor, blotched here and there by a suggestive tropical sweat. Such is the Durán-Mendizábal mansion.

And behind it, the garden. A garden filled with gigantic ceiba trees, walls of bougainvillea vines, and fleeting blushes of jacaranda. And something nobody could explain: an *alfaque*, a type of sandbank that forms at the mouth of a river. Except that here, there was no river.

I didn't explain this to Calixta, not wanting to worry her. We were so different back then! It must have been strange, to a *norteamericana* from Minnesota, to see the little Hispano-Arabic-Mexican enclave. I hurried to explain:

"The Arabs spent seven hundred years in Spain. Half of our Spanish vocabulary is Arabic—"

As if she didn't know. "*Almohada, alberca, alcachofa.*" She laughingly rattled off the words for pillow, swimming pool, and artichoke, completing the enumeration with "*alfil*," as she moved that piece, the bishop, across the chess board.

The fact is that after hours in the VW office I would return to the beautiful mansion and feel like I was entering an eternal world where everything could happen many times without the

couple—me and her—ever sensing how things repeated. That is, she knew my explanation of Mexico's Moorish legacy by heart, but she did not reproach me for my pointless, idiotic insistence.

"Okay, Esteban, I know, I know," my mother, r.i.p., would say to me. "You're boring me. Stop repeating yourself all day long."

Calixta would just murmur "*alfil*," and I would understand it was a tender, repeated invitation to spend an hour playing chess and telling each other the news of our days. Except my news was always the same and hers, really, always *new*.

She knew how to anchor herself in a routine—the care of the house and, above all, the garden—and I appreciated that; I admired her for it. Little by little the big, ugly blotches left by the humidity began to disappear, and there appeared paler woods, unexpected lights. Calixta ordered the restoration of the most prominent portrait in the entryway, a painting darkened with time, and she paid meticulous attention to the garden. She watered, she pruned, she planted, as if this lush grove in Mexico's high tropics gave her the opportunity to create a little paradise unimaginable in Minnesota, an eternal spring that would give her revenge, in a way, for the harsh winters that blow in from Lake Superior.

I appreciated my wife's appealing, precise pastime. I wondered, though, what had happened to the avid student of literature who used to recite Sor Juana and Anne Bradstreet beneath the arches of the colonnades.

I made the mistake of asking her.

"What about your reading?"

"Well," she responded, lowering her gaze. Her show of shyness hid something which did not escape the executive gaze of her husband.

“Don't tell me you've stopped reading?” I said in feigned shock. “Listen here, I don't want your domestic concerns...”

“Esteban,” she said, placing an affectionate hand over mine. “I'm writing.”

“Okay,” I responded with an uneasiness that I myself could not understand.

Then, amplifying my enthusiasm: “I mean, that's great...”

And we didn't say anything more, because Calixta made a bad move on the chess board. I realized that her error was intentional. The nights went by, and I began to think Calixta was making bad chess moves *on purpose* so I would always win. What, then, was the woman's advantage? I wasn't naïve. If a woman lets herself be defeated in one area, it's because she's winning in another.

“It's really great that you have time to read.”

I moved a bishop to devour a pawn.

“So tell me, Calixta, you also have time to write?”

“Knight, bishop, queen.”

Calixta could not miss the winning move, the victory over her husband—me—who had voluntarily or by accident exposed myself to defeat. Distracted from the game, I concentrated on the woman.

“You're not answering me. Why?”

She drew her hands away from the board.

“Yes. I'm writing.”

She smiled with a mix of timidity, apology, and pride.

Immediately I realized my mistake. I could have respected my wife's activity, which, if not secret, was certainly private, almost modest. Instead, I brought it out into the open, and gave

Calixta an advantage that until that moment I had never given her, professionally or intellectually. What was she doing but answering a question? Yes, she wrote. We could have, she and I, lived our whole lives without me ever finding out about it. The hours of the workday separated us. The hours of the night joined us. My occupation never came up in our conjugal conversations. Neither did hers, until that moment. Now, looking back twelve years, I realize my mistake. I lived with an exceptionally lucid, discreet woman. The indiscretion was all mine. I would pay dearly for it.

"What do you write about, Calixta?"

"You don't write 'about' something," she said very quietly. "You just write."

She fidgeted with a butter knife as she responded.

I expected a classic answer, along the lines of "I write for myself, for my own enjoyment." I didn't just expect it. I wanted it.

She did not oblige.

"Literature is a testimony to itself."

"That isn't an answer. I don't understand."

"Certainly, Esteban." She put down the knife. "Anything can be the object of writing, because anything can be the object of imagination. But only when it is true to itself can literature successfully communicate—"

Her voice gained authority as she went.

"That is, it joins its own imagination to that of the reader. Sometimes that takes a long time. Sometimes it is immediate."

She lifted her gaze from the tablecloth and cutlery.

"You see, I read the classic Spanish poets. Their imagination connected immediately with

that of the reader. Quevedo, Lope. Others had to wait a long time to be understood. Emily Dickinson, Nerval. Others were resurrected thanks to time. Góngora."

"And you?" I asked, a little annoyed by all her erudition.

Calixta smiled enigmatically.

"I do not want to see or be seen."

"What do you mean?"

She answered as if she couldn't even hear me. "Above all, I don't want to hear myself being heard."

She lost her smile.

"I don't want to be available."

I lost my own.

From that moment, two contradictory feelings coexisted in my spirit. On one hand, the relief of knowing that for Calixta, writing was a secret, confessional profession. On the other, the need to defeat an incorporeal rival, the specter of literature. I resolved it by completely occupying Calixta's body. My wife's confession—"I write"—became my task of possessing her so intensely that my undesired rival would be exhausted.

Yes, I think I tired my wife's body, I submitted her to my masculine hunger night after night. My mind, at the office, wandered as I thought:

"What new pleasure can I give her? What position is left for me to try? What erogenous zone does Calixta have that I haven't found yet?"

I knew the answer. It tortured me to know it. I needed to read what she was writing.

"Could I read some of your things?"

She was visibly disconcerted.

“They're hardly even drafts, Esteban.”

“Better than nothing, right?”

“I need to work on them more.”

“Perfect them, you mean?”

“No, no.” Her hair swung back and forth. “No work is perfect.”

“Shakespeare, Cervantes,” I said with a sarcasm that I myself found surprising, because I didn't intend it.

“Yes.” Calixta, with great concentration, stirred the sugar at the bottom of her cup of coffee. “They above all. Above all great works. They are the most imperfect.”

“I don't understand.”

“Yes.” She lifted the cup to her lips, as if trying to smother her own words. “A perfect book would be unreadable. Only God, if anyone, would understand it.”

“Or the angels,” I said, only increasing my unwanted sarcasm.

“I mean,” she continued as if she hadn't heard me, as if she were holding a solitary dialogue, without realizing how much her know-it-all monologue was starting to annoy me, “I mean that imperfection is the wound through which a book bleeds, and thus becomes humanly legible—”

I insisted, annoyed, “Can I read something of yours?”

She nodded.

That night I found three rather short stories on my desk. The first was about the return of a man whose wife thought he was lost forever in a shipwreck. The second *denounced*—there was no other word for it—a romantic relationship, which it condemned for a single reason: it was secret, and when it lost its secrecy and became public, the couple began, imperceptibly, to drift

apart. The third, finally, had as its subject nothing less than adultery, and it supported the unfaithful wife, saying the tedium of her useless husband justified her actions.

Until that moment, I had thought of myself as a well-adjusted man. When I read Calixta's stories—especially the last one—I felt an attack of unbelievable rage. I grabbed my wife's precious papers, ripped them to pieces, set them on fire with a match, opened the window and threw them to the wind, which blew them into the garden and even further—it was a gusty night—off towards the mountains of Puebla.

I thought I knew Calixta. I had no reason to be surprised at her attitude the next morning and the days after that.

Life flowed on with the habits it had acquired. Calixta never asked me my opinion of her stories. She never requested that I give them back. Her papers were handwritten, scrawled. I was certain: there were no copies. Just by looking at my wife every night I could tell that her creation was spontaneous in the technical sense. I could not imagine her copying stories that for her were attempts at the incomplete, testimonies to the elusive, signs of the imperfection that fascinated her so much.

I didn't comment on her writing, and she didn't ask my opinion, or ask me to return her stories.

Calixta, just with that fact, was defeating me.

I shuffled through the restless possibilities. She loved me so much that she was afraid to offend me (“Give me back my papers”) or pressure me (“What did you think of my stories?”). She was doing something worse. She was showing me she was indifferent to my opinion. That she lived the long, hot days in the house on the plains in complete self-sufficiency. That I was the inevitable nuisance that arrived at seven or eight at night to share with her the dispensable but

routine hours. Dinner, chess, sex. The day belonged to her. And the day belonged to her damn literature.

"She's smarter than me."

Today I can evaluate how slowly and how intensely a feeling of growing envy, of latent humiliation, can filter its way in, finally erupting in the certainty that Calixta was superior to me, not just intellectually but morally. My wife's life took on meaning at the expense of mine. My hours at the office were an intolerable confession of my own mediocrity. Calixta's silence spoke to me quite loudly of her eloquence. She was silent because she created. She had no need to talk about what she did.

She was, however, the same girl I first met. Her love, her happiness, our hours together were just as good now as before. The bad part was somewhere else. Not in my heart, secretly offended, distant, disagreeable. She was the guilty one, her tranquility an affront to my spirit tormented by the growing certainty:

"Esteban, you are inferior to your wife."

One cause of my growing irritation was that Calixta never abandoned the care of the house. The old Huejotzingo property became more beautiful day by day. Calixta, as if her frigid Anglo-Scandinavian heritage attracted her towards midday, kept discovering and highlighting the Arabic features of the house. She moved a stone cross into the middle of the courtyard. She polished and accentuated the rectangular frame of the Arabic arch on the doors. She reinforced the wooden *alfanjías* that form the frame of the ceiling. She called experts, who assisted her. The architect Juan Urquiaga employed his amazing technique of mixing sand, lime, and maguey slime to give the walls of the house a softness close—maybe even superior—to that of a female's

back. And Pedro Ángel Palou, novelist and scholar at MUAP, brought a team of restorers to clean the dark portrait in the entryway.

Bit by bit, the figure of a Moor began to appear, in simple attire—the *albornoz* worn by both sexes—but with the elegant trappings of nobility: a jacket lined with sable marten, a silk cap adorned with jewels…The unsettling part was that the painting's face was not discernible. It was a shadow. It caught my attention because everything else—cap, jewels, marten fur, white *albornoz*—became brighter and brighter as the restoration of the portrait progressed.

The face persisted in hiding among the shadows.

I asked Palou:

"The cap catches my attention. Didn't Muslims generally wear turbans?"

"Initially, the turban was reserved for *alfaqui* doctors who had made a pilgrimage to Mecca, but starting in the eleventh century everyone was allowed to wear them," answered the Puebla academic.

"And who is it a painting of?"

Palou shook his head.

"I don't know. Has it always been here, in your house?"

I tried to think. I didn't know what to answer. Sometimes, a person can overlook the most obvious features of a place precisely because they're obvious. A portrait in the entryway. Since when? Since always? Since my parents were alive? I didn't have a clear answer. All I had was perplexity at my own lack of attention.

Palou observed me, and made a mysterious movement with his hands. His gesture was enough to remind me that this slow revelation of the riches of my own house was the work of my wife. Stronger than ever, the echo in my soul returned:

"Esteban, you are inferior to your wife."

At the office, my injured masculinity started to manifest itself through incontrollable irritability, arrogantly given orders, verbal abuse of my inferiors, crude jokes about the secretaries, and clumsy sexual advances.

I came home filled with growing shame and anger. There I found, placid and affectionate, the offender. The *gringa.* Calixta Brand.

In bed, my sexual prowess diminished. It was her fault. At the table, I pushed my dishes aside. It was her fault. Calixta took away all my appetites. And in chess, finally, I realized the obvious. *Calixta was letting me win.* She made elementary mistakes so my measly pawn could defeat her magnanimous queen.

I started to fear—or to wish—that my emotional state would infect Calixta. If we were equals, at least we would torture each other mutually. But as I showed more and more coldness and irritation, she remained unaffected. I committed miniscule offenses, such as moving my cleaning supplies—soap, shaving cream, razors, toothpaste and toothbrush, combs—from our shared bathroom to one just for me.

"This way we won't have to wait in line," I said frivolously.

I increased the offense. I took my clothes to another room.

"I'm freeing up space for your dresses."

As if she had so many, the Minnesota peasant…

All I had left was the decisive step: sleeping in the guest room.

She took my decisions calmly. She smiled at me pleasantly. I was free to move my things and feel comfortable. That damn smile told me quite clearly that her motives were not friendly, but perverse, infinitely hateful. Calixta tolerated my little rebellions because she was the ruler

and mistress of the greatest rebellion. She was the ruler of creation. She inhabited the silent tower of the castle as Queen. I, more and more, acted like a petulant child, unable to cross the castle moat in one leap.

I silently repeated a little song of my father's when I received complaints from the neighbors about a badly parked car, or music too loud:

The little dwarves cried angry tears
When granny pinched their little ears.

The dwarf of the castle, throwing a fit as the drawbridge went up, while the imperturbable princess, with her black magic and blonde braids, watched from the tower…

My desire was fading to nothing. I was not to blame. Her talent was. Let's be clear. I was incapable of rising above Calixta's superiority.

"And now what are you writing?" I asked one night, daring to look her in the eyes.

"A story about looking."

I looked at her, encouraging her to continue.

"The world is filled with people who know each other but don't look at each other. In an apartment house in Chicago. In a church here in Puebla. What are they? Neighbors? Former lovers? A future couple? Mortal enemies?"

"Well, what are they?" I said, quite annoyed, wiping my lips with a napkin.

"It's up to them to decide. That's the story."

"And if two of these people lived together, what then?"

"Interesting premise, Esteban. Try to write about all the people we don't look at even though we have them right in front of us. Two people, you could write about, with their faces as close together as two passengers on a crowded bus. They travel with their bodies joined, squeezed together, but they don't speak to each other. They don't say a word."

To top off the unhappiness my wife's serene intelligence caused me, I should reiterate that, however much time she spent writing, she still took painstaking care of everything related to the house. Cuca, my family's cook for generations, was the keeper of the Puebla-tile kitchen, and of the scandalously delicious little meals that she cooked—*puerco adobado, frijoles gordos de Xocoyol, enchiladas pixtli, mole miahuateco.*

Hermenegilda, an indigenous girl who had recently arrived from a town in the mountains, worked silently and with her head down. She attended to minor but indispensable tasks needed for the upkeep of an old, half-dilapidated estate. But Ponciano, the gardener—old like the house, old like the cook—beat me to the punch one morning and said:

"Young Esteban, let me tell you the truth. I don't think I'm needed here."

I expressed surprise.

"Señora Calixta is busying herself more than ever with the garden. Little by little, she's leaving me without any chores. She prunes. She plants. Let me tell you. She almost caresses the plants, the flowers, the vines."

Ponciano, with his face like an aged black-and-white actor—say, Arturo Soto Rangel or el Nanche Arosamena—had his straw hat in his hands, as he always did when he addressed me, as a sign of respect. This time, he wrung it violently. As mistreated as that little hat was already.

"Pardon the expression, chief, but the mistress is making me feel all of a sudden like an old fart. Sometimes I pass my time looking at the volcano and saying to myself, now Ponciano,

imagine that Iztaccíhuatl is closer to you than Doña Calixta—begging your pardon, master—and that you would be better off, Ponciano, if you went to plant maguey instead of staying here and planting like a stupid *güey* all day long…"

Ponciano, I remembered, went to the Puebla bullfights and novilladas every Sunday afternoon. It's incredible the encyclopedic amount of information these Mexican servants have got in their noggins. Ponciano and the bulls. Cuca and the cooking. Only Hermenegilda, the little maid with the lowered gaze, seemed ignorant of everything. I finally asked her:

"Hey, do you know what your name is?"

"Hermenegilda Torvay, if it please the master."

"Pretty long, kid. I'll call you Herme or I'll call you Gilda. Which do you prefer?"

"As your grace wishes."

Yes, the women (and men) from isolated towns in Mexico's mountains speak pure 16th-century Spanish, as if the language there had frozen in place, and Herme—as I decided to shorten it—was full of "your grace," "goodwife," "gramercy," "gobelyn," and "gladsome," just to name the "g"s.

The thing is that even though Mexico is modern by all appearances, nothing dies completely. It's as if the past has only paused, kept in a cellar filled with useless trash. Then one fine day, pow, a completely unexpected word, act, or memory appears, standing there in front of us, like a spectral comedian, the ghost of the tricolor Cantinflas that all Mexicans have inside, saying to us:

"At your service, boss."

Boss, boss-lady, little boss: *jefe, jefa, jefecita*. That's what we Mexicans call our mothers. With complete ambivalence, it's worth adding. A *madre* is your dear old lady, but also a

worthless object—a *madre*—or a chaotic situation—a *desmadre.* The worst possible insult is to tell somebody to go fuck his mother. But, on the other hand, you only have one mother, even though "pretty little mama" could just as easily be addressed to a venerable grandmother as to a filthy prostitute.

My "boss-lady," María Dolores Iñárritu de Durán, had a strong Basque personality worthy of the severe attitude of my father, Esteban (like me) Durán-Mendizábal. Both had died. I visited the family tomb in the city cemetery regularly, but I confess that I never addressed my respected father, as if the old man could take care of himself in hell, heaven or purgatory. And even though you could say the same about my mother, I did feel like I could speak to her, tell her my troubles, seek her advice.

The truth is that as my relationship with Calixta broke apart, my visits to the cemetery, and my monologues (which I considered dialogues) in front of the tomb of Doña María Dolores, increased. How I miss the times when I reminded my little mama only about pleasant moments, and thanked her for parties and advice, presents and caresses! Now, my words became steadily bitterer until culminating, one afternoon in August, under the rain of one of Mexico's punctual summer storms, in something that I carried captive in my chest and that, finally, I set free.

"Oh, little mama, why did you die instead of my wife Calixta!"

I don't know what powers the morganatic marriage between a wish and a curse can have. What terrifying guilt filled me from head to toe like a bitter bile when I returned to find the house lit up, the ancestral mansion illuminated more by the proverbial ember than by the lights, by the distant clamor, the coming and going, the howling ambulances and the police cars.

I made my way through all those people, without knowing who they were (except the servants). Doctors? Nurses? Police? Neighbors from town? They were lifting Calixta into a

stretcher. She seemed unconscious, and her long hair dragged in the dust, hanging off the stretcher. The ambulance departed, and the explanation arrived.

Calixta was found face-down in the eavesdrop. The gardener Ponciano found her, but did not dare—he said later—disturb the will of God, if that was—no doubt—what happened to the meddling mistress who left him without any chores. Or maybe, he said, falling on your face was a Protestant custom of people who come down from the north.

The gardener's passivity was reproached by the faithful cook Cuca when she sought out Calixta to ask her about the food order for tomorrow. She gave a cry of alarm and summoned the little maid Hermenegilda, ordering her to call a doctor. That Hermenegilda—Cuca told me in a huff—didn't lift a finger, contemplating her recumbent mistress with something like satisfaction. In the end it was Cuca who had to take action, having lost precious minutes, which turned to hours waiting for the ambulance.

Now, in the hospital, the doctor explained. Calixta had suffered an attack of spastic paralysis. The nerve fibers of her corticospinal tract had been affected.

"Will she live?"

The doctor looked at me with extreme gravity.

"That depends what we call living. In these cases, it is most likely that the attack stems from hypoxia, or a lack of oxygen in the tissues, and it affects intelligence, posture, and physical balance."

"Speech?"

"That as well. She will not be able to speak. That is, Don Esteban, your wife suffers an illness that inhibits her motor reflexes, including the capacity to speak."

"What will she do?"

The hours—the years—that followed gave me my answer. Calixta was seated in a wheelchair, and spent her days in the shade of the ceiba tree, staring blankly at the collapse of the garden. I mean "collapse" in the physical sense. The eavesdrop began to be hidden behind the disordered growth of the garden. The delightful Arabic grove designed by Calixta now obeyed the law of nature, which is the law of the jungle.

Ponciano, who I ordered to return to his chores, refused. He said the garden was bewitched or something. I couldn't ask Cuca to transform into a gardener. And Hermenegilda, Cuca informed me one afternoon when I returned from work:

"Is starting to think she's a bigshot, Don Esteban. As if now she were the lady of the house. She's a rebel. Tighten her leash, I'm begging you…"

There was a threat implicit in Cuca's words: it's Hermenegilda or me. I promised to discipline the maid. As for the garden, I decided to leave it to its own devices. And so it was: it grew at a vine's pace, unfeeling and silent until the day we noticed its denseness.

What did I want? Why did I let the garden that surrounded the crippled Calixta grow at a pace that, in my imagination, would finally suffocate that woman, superior to me and now subject, completely powerless, to my whims?

My hatred came from envy of my wife's intellectual superiority, and from the impotence produced by knowing yourself useless in the face of that which overtakes us. Before, I was reduced to complaining to myself, and committing insulting little acts. Now, had the moment arrived to display my power? But what kind of abilities could I display to someone with no abilities at all?

Because Calixta Brand, day by day, was losing abilities. Not just those related to her intelligence, compromised and now muted. Also those related to physical movement. Even her

beauty faded to such a degree that, perhaps, she too wished the grass would grow above her head, to hide her skin that became more grayish each day, her discolored lips, her graying hair, her sparse, unpainted eyebrows, the overall appearance of a cracked stucco wall. The general disarray of her looks.

I charged Herme with cleaning her and caring for her. She did it halfheartedly. She washed her by the bucketful—Cuca told me, indignant—dried her with a coarse towel and returned her to her spot in the garden.

Pedro Ángel Palou came by to see me, and he told me he had visited Calixta, a former student of his at the Cholula Summer School.

"I don't understand why she's not under the care of a nurse."

I compensated for my guilt with silence.

"I thought the maid would suffice," I finally said. "The case is clear. Calixta suffers a high degree of spasticity."

"And therefore she deserves constant care."

As refined a man as the writer and professor was, there was the hint of a threat in his response.

"What would you propose, Professor?" I felt obligated to respond.

"I know a medical student who loves gardening. He could serve both functions, doctor and gardener."

"Of course. Bring him by one day."

"He's Arab and Muslim."

I shrugged. But I don't know why such a "salutary" proposal filled me with choler. I accepted that I liked Calixta's prostration; it compensated for the sense of inferiority that had grown inside my chest like an evil worm, until coming out of my mouth like a snake.

I remembered, with resentment, the exasperation of my attacks that Calixta never answered. The subtlety of suppressed superiority. The way of saying to Esteban (to me):

"It's not a woman's place to give orders."

Her intolerably powerful submission had now become a form of gratifyingly weak slavery. But nevertheless, my wife's motionless figure possessed a sort of statuesque gravity, and a voice of mute reproach that entered my imagination with the force of a trade wind.

"Esteban, please, darling Esteban, stop seeing the world in terms of inferiors and superiors. Remember that there is nothing but relationships among human beings. We do not have any other life outside of our skin. Only death completely separates and individualizes us. Even so, rest assured that, sooner or later, we will have to be held accountable. The final judgement has its court in this world. Nobody dies before accounting for his life. There is no need to wait for the gaze of the Creator to know how much depth, how much worth we have given to life, to the world, to people, Esteban."

She had lost her power of speech. She was fighting to regain it. Her gaze told me so, every time I planted myself in front of her in the garden. It was a glassy gaze, but eloquent.

"Why don't you like my talent, Esteban? I don't lessen you. Share my happiness. Make it ours."

These guilty encounters with Calixta's gaze exasperated me. For a moment, I thought my living, acting presence would be insult enough. As I *read* Calixta, I began to recognize the cowardly misery of this new relationship with my useless wife. That was my deplorable, initial

vengeance. Reading her own writing to her, without caring whether she listened, whether she understood, or not.

"Thus, writing is a way of emigrating towards our own soul. Such that 'we must be held accountable, because we create neither ourselves nor the world. So that I do not know how much is left for me to do in the world.' And to top it off, my darling hack, 'But I do know one thing. I want to help you not to squander your inheritance, Esteban…"

So the imbecile was naming me, addressing me with her damn papers from within her living death, which I regarded with growing hate and contempt…

"Did I have the right to marry you? Never to have met would have been worst of all, can you at least admit that? And if I die before you, Esteban, please ask yourself: how do you want me, Calixta Brand, to appear in your dreams? If I die, look carefully at my portrait and note the changes. I swear that in death I will leave you my living image, so you may see me age as if I had not died. And on the day of your own death, my likeness will disappear from the photograph, and you will have disappeared from life."

It was true.

I ran to the bedroom and took out the forgotten photo of the young Calixta Brand, abandoned at the bottom of a sock drawer. I looked at the young woman I met under the arches of Puebla and made my wife. I gave her the name of a noble lineage. Calixta de Durán-Mendizabal e Iñarritu. I picked up the portrait. It trembled in my hands. She was no longer, in the photograph, the fresh, lovely student on the square. She was identical to the invalid woman who wilted day by day in the garden…how long would she take to vanish from the photograph? Was that dreadful witch Calixta Brand's prediction true: her image would only disappear from the photo when I myself died?

So I had to do two things. Postpone my death by keeping Calixta alive, and take vengeance on my wife's detestable imagination by humiliating her.

I returned to the garden with a handful of her papers in my fist, and set them on fire in front of Calixta and her glassy gaze.

Her impassivity incited me to another act of release. One Sunday, taking advantage of Cuca the cook's absence, I took the servant Hermenegilda by the arm, brought her to the garden and there, in front of Calixta, unbuttoned my fly, freed my prick and ordered the maid:

"Let's go. Hurry up. Suck it."

There are women who keep a mouthful. Others swallow the semen.

"Herme, spit my milk in your mistress's face."

The maid seemed to hesitate.

"I order you. The master orders it. Don't tell me you feel respect for that damn *gringa.*"

Calixta closed her eyes as she was hit by the thick, whitish gob. I was about to order Hermenegilda:

"Now clean her. Let's go, slave-girl."

My aggravated recklessness stopped me. Let the crust of my love stay on her face. Calixta remained impassive. Herme left, somewhere between proud and repentant. Who knows what went on in the head of an Indian who came down from the hills to the beat of drums. I went to eat in the city, and when I came back at dusk, I found Dr. Palou on his knees in front of Calixta, cleaning her face. He didn't look at me. He only said, with irrefutable authority:

"Starting tomorrow, the student I told you about will come. Nurse and gardener. He will be responsible for Calixta." He stood up and I accompanied him, without displaying any emotion, to the door. We passed by the portrait of the Arab in the hallway. I stopped in surprise.

The jeweled, silk headdress had been substituted for a turban. Palou was leaving. I stopped him by the arm.

"Professor, this portrait…"

Palou interrogated me sternly from the depths of his thick spectacles.

"Yesterday he had a different headdress."

"You are mistaken," the Puebla novelist told me severely. "He has always worn a turban…Fashions change," he added without moving one facial muscle.

The gardener-nurse was to arrive in a couple days. A disloyal, hypocritical intention took control of my spirit. I would try in the time that remained to get friendly with Calixta. I didn't want my cruelty to leak through the walls of my house. It was enough that Palou had recognized the lack of compassion that surrounded Calixta. But Palou was at once a just and a discrete man.

I began my farce by kneeling down in front of my wife. I said I would rather have been the sick one. But my wife's gaze lit up for an instant, sending me a message.

"I am not sick. I simply wished to flee from you, and could not find a better way."

I reacted by wishing she would die once and for all, freeing me from her burden.

Again, her gaze became eloquent to tell me: "My death would make you very happy. Therefore, I do not die."

My spirit gave an unexpected turn. I looked at my past and wanted to believe that I had depended on her to give me self-confidence. Now she depended on me, yet I didn't tolerate it. I suspected, seeing her sitting there diminished, unsure whether to desire her death or postpone it in the name of my own life, that there survived in that noble but destroyed face a strange will to *become herself again*, that her presence contained a dark speech, that even though she was not beautiful as before, she was capable of resuscitating the memory of her beauty and making me

responsible for her misery. Would this useless woman take vengeance on my own, vigorous masculinity?

I almost burst out laughing. That was when I heard footsteps in the Arabic garden's growing weeds, and saw the young man approaching us.

"Miguel Asmá," he introduced himself with a slight inclination of the head and his hand on his chest.

"Ah, the nurse," I said, somewhat perturbed.

"And the gardener," the young man added, taking a critical glance at the state of the jungle that surrounded Calixta.

I regarded him with the frank arrogance I reserve for those I consider inferior. Except that here, I encountered an even prouder gaze than my own. The so-called Miguel Asmá's appearance was very striking. His blond curls seemed to form a helmet of unbelievably kinky hair, and contrasted noticeably with his dark complexion, just as his gaze, brimming with tenderness, contrasted with a mouth that barely concealed disdain. His straight, unnerving nose sniffed constantly, with an impetus that, to me, seemed *cruel.* Perhaps he was smelling himself, so strong was the aroma of musk that emanated from his body or perhaps from his clothes: a very loose white shirt, very tight leather pants, bare feet.

"How're your studies?" I said in my most unbearable tough-guy voice.

"Good, sir."

He did not stop looking at me with an air of serene acceptance of my existence.

"Very advanced? Very up-to-date?" I smiled crookedly.

Miguel smiled in return. "Sometimes the oldest thing is most modern, sir."

"How's that?"

"That is, I'm reading Avicenna's *Quanun fi at-tibb*, a book which, after all, was an established, universal authority everywhere for several centuries and remains, essentially, current."

"Jesus Christ, use real words," I said, arrogant.

"Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine* and also the medical writings of Maimonides."

"Bedouin swindles?" I laughed in his face.

"No, sir. Maimonides was Jewish, he fled from Córdoba, passed through Fez in disguise, and settled in Cairo under the protection of Sultan Saladin. You see, sir, Jews and Arabs are brothers."

"Tell that to Sharon and Arafat." I was cracking up.

"They have in common not only the Semitic race," Miguel Asmá persisted, "but also the fate of wanderers, flight, displacement…"

"Tramps," I interjected, trying now to offend him.

Miguel Asmá did not react. "Pilgrims. Maimonides a Jew, Avicenna a Muslim, both timeless instructors of distilled, Señor Durán, essential medicine."

"So they've sent me an Arab witchdoctor." I laughed again.

Miguel laughed with me. "Perhaps you would benefit from reading Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed*. There you would learn that science and religion are compatible."

"Witchdoctor." I cracked up as I walked away.

The next day, Miguel, from an early hour, was working in the garden. Bit by bit the weeds disappeared, and in their place old Ponciano reappeared, helping the young doctor-gardener, pruning, cutting down the tall grass, flattening the land.

Miguel, working under the sun, wore nothing but a loincloth, and I was annoyed to see the lascivious looks the little maid Hermenegilda gave him, and the young gardener's absolute indifference.

"And you?" I questioned the wily Ponciano. "Changed your mind?"

"Don Miguel is sent from heaven," murmured the old man.

"Is that so? What in heaven do you mean?" I played with language.

"He says we gardeners are the guardians of Paradise, Don Esteban. You never said that to me, tell you the truth."

Seducer of the maid, ally of the gardener, caregiver of my wife, I felt like this Miguel was becoming a real thorn in my balls. He had too much influence in my household. I couldn't quit my job. I left for Puebla at nine in the morning, and returned at seven in the evening. The workday was his. When Cuca started cooking Arab dishes, I became irritated with her for the first time.

"Okay, Doña Cuca, so now we're going to eat like gypsies, or what?"

"Oh, Don Esteban, you should see the recipes young Miguel gives me."

"Yeah, like what?"

"No, nothing new. It's his way of explaining to me, master, that for every serving we eat, there are seven angels flying around the dish."

"Have you seen these angels?"

Doña Cuca showed me her gold teeth.

"Even better. I've tasted them. Ever since the young man came into the kitchen, everything tastes like honey. See for yourself!"

And as for Calixta? What happened to Calixta?

"You know, Señor Durán, sometimes illness cures people," Miguel said to me one day.

I understood that the fallen ephebe in my garden could dazzle my servants. He worked under the high Puebla sun in a short loincloth that let him flaunt his slender, well-toned body, where everything seemed hard: chest, arms, abs, legs, butt. His only imperfection was a pair of deep scars on his back.

Beyond his physical beauty, what did he give my incapacitated wife?

Revenge. Calixta was cared for with extreme devotion by a handsome boy while I, her husband, only viewed her with hatred, disdain, or indifference.

What did the young Miguel Asmá see in Calixta? What did he see that I didn't? What I had forgotten about her? What attracted me when I met her? Now Calixta aged, didn't speak, her writings were burnt or discarded by my envious hand. What did Miguel Asmá read in that silence? What attracted him to this sick woman, to this sickness?

Of course it would annoy me that as I disregarded her, another man already loved her, and by that very act made me doubt my will to love her again.

Miguel Asmá spent the whole day in the garden, at Calixta's side. He interrupted his work to sit on the ground in front of her, to softly read her passages of a book, to enchant her, perhaps.

One Sunday, hidden among the wild plants that were being tamed more and more, I shamefully managed to hear what the gardener was reading out loud.

"God entrusted the garden to Adam for his enjoyment. Adam was tempted by the demon Iblis and fell into sin. But God is all-powerful. God is all mercy and compassion. God understood that Iblis acted against Adam out of envy and resentment. Therefore, he condemned

the Demon, and Adam returned to Paradise, pardoned by God and consecrated as the first man but also as the first prophet."

His dark eyes gazed intensely from beneath his crown of blonde, kinky hair.

"Adam fell. But later, he ascended."

So I was dealing with an illuminatus, a college-boy Niño Fidencio, a religious swindler. I shrugged, involuntarily, my shoulders. If that soothed poor Calixta, *tant mieux*, as my Francophile mother would say. What started to torment me was something more complicated. It was my surprise. As I ended up hating her, someone else was already loving her. Miguel Asmá's attention to Calixta was so tender that it made me waver for a moment. Could I love her again? And something more insistent. What did Miguel see in Calixta that I no longer saw?

Something more visible, though perhaps more mysterious, distracted me from these questions. In a few weeks, at the bidding of Miguel Asmá and his enthusiastic collaborators—Ponciano the old gardener, Hermenegilda the maid, who was obviously enamored of the beautiful intruder, and even the maternal Doña Cuca, overflowing with instinct—the tangled pastureland that the garden had become reverted to a greater beauty than it had ever possessed.

Since the garden sloped down from the *alfiz* that framed the front door to the *alfaque* that Calixta watched all day as if a nonexistent river were flowing through the sandbank, Miguel Asmá was wisely terracing the land, starting with the courtyard, in the center of which a fountain, once dry, was now flowing. A soft murmur began to be reflected, subtly, serenely, on my wife's face.

With arduous but swift tenacity, Miguel and his company—my servants, no less! —worked over the whole garden. Correctly pruned and terraced, it started to flower magically. Winter daffodils, spring irises, April violets, jasmine and poppies, chamomile flowers in May

becoming Calixta's favorite beverage. Blue wallflowers, perfumed myrtles, white roses that Miguel placed among Calixta Brand's gray hairs, haha.

Stupefied, I realized that the young Miguel had done away with the seasons. He had gathered winter, spring, summer, and fall into a single season. I felt obligated to express my astonishment.

He smiled, as usual. "Remember, Señor Durán, that in the Valley of Puebla, as in the rest of the Mexican Plateau, the four seasons of the year coexist…"

"You've enlisted all my servants," I said with my habitual dryness.

"They're very enthusiastic. I think that all Mexicans carry in their souls a longing for a lost garden," said Miguel, laboriously scratching his back. "A beautiful garden rejuvenates us; don't you think?"

His statement was enough to send me up to my room to look at the old photo of Calixta. She was losing age. She was reverting to the beautiful student from Minnesota's Twin Cities whom I fell in love with when we were both students. I dropped, astonished, the picture. I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. Was I fooling myself thinking that while she rejuvenated in the photo, I aged in the mirror?

I don't know whether this doubt, transforming bit by bit into certainty, caused me to sit down next to Calixta one afternoon and tell her very quietly:

"Believe me, Calixta, I no longer desire you, but I desire your happiness…"

Miguel, stooped over a flower bed, lifted his head and said to me: "Don't worry, Don Esteban. Calixta surely knows that all the threats against her have already disappeared."

It was chilling. It was true. I saw her sitting there, serene, aged, with a face that insisted on being noble in spite of the malignant destruction of illness and time. Her gaze spoke for her.

Her gaze *wrote* what she carried in her soul. And the question her spirit asked me was: "I am no longer beautiful as before. Is that reason enough to stop loving me? Why does Miguel Asmá know how to love me when you do not, Esteban? Do you think it's my fault? Can you not accept that it's not your fault either, because you are never at fault, you are only indifferent, arrogant?"

Miguel Asmá completed, out loud, the thought she could not express.

"You're asking yourself, sir, what to do with the woman you loved and no longer desire, even though you still care for her…"

How the boy's generosity offended me! He didn't know his position…

"Always keep inferiors in their place," my mother, r.i.p., used to advise me.

"You don't understand," I said to Miguel. "You don't understand that before, I depended on her to give me confidence in life, and now she depends on me, and she can't stand it."

"She will take vengeance," murmured the sinister Adonis.

"How, if she's an invalid?" I asked, exasperated by my own stupidity, and I added ferociously: "I'll have you know that my greatest pleasure, you little squirt, is denying invalid Calixta everything I didn't want to give her when she was healthy…"

Miguel shook his head. "She lacks nothing, sir. I give her everything she needs."

I was furious. "Nursing care? Gardening skills? A servant?"

I practically spit my words.

"Attention, sir. Attention is what she requires."

"And how do you know, if she can't talk?"

Miguel Asmá answered with another question. "Have you asked yourself what part of her you could have now, having had all of her?"

I couldn't avoid sarcasm. "What are you offering me, kid?"

"It doesn't matter, Señor. I have managed to make all threats against her disappear…"

He said it without pride. He said it with a look of pain, abruptly scratching his back.

"You haven't been paying attention," the young man told me. "Your wife lost her power of speech. She has fought and suffered heroically, but you haven't noticed."

"What does it matter, stupid?"

"It matters to you, sir. You've ended up losing."

"Ah, yes?" I recovered my arrogant nobility. "We shall see."

I stormed out of the garden. I entered the house. Something perturbed me. The portrait attracted me. The image of an Arab in a turban had finally cleared, as if a restorer and craftsman had removed layer after layer of guilt, until revealing the face, with its beatific gaze and cruel lips, straight nose and curly hair sticking out over its ears.

It was Miguel Asmá.

Surprise was no longer possible. All I could do was run upstairs, reach in my bedroom, look at the portrait of Calixta Brand.

The image of my wife had disappeared. It was a pure white space, with no likeness.

It was the omen—I understood—of my own death.

I ran to the window, startled by the flight of doves in large white and gray flocks.

I saw what I was permitted to see.

The young Calixta Brand, the pretty girl I met and loved under the arches of Puebla, rested, beautiful and docile, in the arms of the so-called Miguel Asmá.

Again, as in the beginning, she pushed aside, with a quick movement of her hand, the blonde, childish lock that obscured her gaze.

Like the first day.

Embracing my wife, Miguel Asmá ascended from the garden towards the firmament. Two enormous wings had sprouted from his aching back, as if during all his time among us, thanks to the gravity of his will-power, Miguel had suppressed the push of the immense wings to burst forth and do what they were now doing: ascending, leaving behind the silhouette of the neighboring volcanoes, flying over the gardens and rooftops of Huejotzingo, the old convent with plateresque colonnades, the corner chapels, the Franciscan columns, the carved roof of the sacristy of San Diego, while I attempted to murmur:

"How did this young man manage to rob me of my love?"

I had enough intelligence left to realize I was a complete idiot.

And below, in the garden, Cuca and Hermenegilda and Ponciano, amazed, watched the miracle (or whatever it was) until Miguel, with Calixta in his arms, disappeared from our lives the moment Calixta waved goodbye. However, the voice of the doctor and gardener lingered, like an echo carried down to the flowing water of the *alfaque*, yesterday a dry sandbank, today a cool, murmuring river that foretold, I know, my lonely old age, when on rainy days I would give anything to have Calixta Brand back.

What I cannot do, as much as I want to, is ask her forgiveness.

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