

Lost in Translation

Ah, shit. Where am I? Is what I always think in moments like these. I am in my office. I am in my office, and I was in my office when I had that strange daydream, which is important because after it I decided I needed to walk somewhere, vaguely up.

I call it a daydream because I wasn't exactly asleep when I experienced it, more like zoning out, even though it wasn't really day, but in fact the dead of night. Still, we don't really have a better word for whatever that was. Reverie? No, that wouldn't be me. Unless I'm speaking for Giuseppe, that's more his thing. La reverie? No idea.

I don't want, didn't want to be up in my office late at night working on a translation of a text I barely understand, I want a better metaphor but I can't stop thinking of it yielding to me, giving up some of its sense, but it's harder than stone, and I'm not steel or diamond, I'm like a noodle, always have been, wet at best so that I flop against it and stick uncomfortably, dry at worst: I shatter. When I told my father I was tired he told me just to keep stacking, cut and carry, cut and carry, he said it twice like that, I don't know where he gets this shit from, as far as I know he's never chopped a log in his life, but I guess it helps him through long days in the office. Anyway.

I've told a bunch of different people different things about how I found this author I am translating-trying-to-translate, Giuseppe Lemana Scarada. I've told them I found a book of his poems on a sea wall in San Sebastian, and that I read his flows of lung-crushingly humid verse in time with the waves exploding at my dangling feet in the dying light. I've told them that he was gifted to me by a friend, the one who looks me hard in the eye as she hands me the green, library-bound thing, such an ugly rectangle you can't imagine it would have subtlety within. My favorite version of the story is the most ridiculous, it's the one I tell about the job I never had. You know I

used to work in publishing? I’ve been saying to people at grad school, they love that shit, I was telling people back at home, too, in Oaxaca City, so if they ever ask around to corroborate my story (and how even would they) I would have people to back me up. I would even wake up early so that my roommates would think I was going to work and then I’d spend all day walking up and down the city, taking calle San Miguel west until I hit La Avenida quinta and then peeling left, until that street bisects into into the highway, and then I take that weird house-lined thunderline on foot and stop to get food or a coffee here and there until it ends at the park, and then I just walk around over there, I don’t know that part of the city and so I was still sort of walking it randomly with the purpose of mapping it for myself by the time I left to come here. I did that even through the summer, and I would come home drenched and tell them Man, I’m tired, work was busy as hell today. And then I would go work as a bus boy at the big hotel at night, my real job. According to that version of events, I found Giuseppe at my ‘job’ with a publisher, because I read some of his letters for a research project I was doing on a more famous writer. It’s so specific and improbable that it’s got to be true. I took it from the plot of a shitty Chilean novel I’m sure no one that I ever told that story is ever going to read.

But what I’m telling *you* is that I found Giuseppe because of Larry. Larry more or less shoved him in my face. Larry more or less cracked my jaw open and shoved Guissepe down my sore and distended throat, it’s been disgusting, he seems to expand on contact with water too so I’ve just been trying to cram this guy down and digest him ever since even as he fills me up from all sides like those multicolored inflatable dinosaur foam capsules fill up a child’s bathtub. He gets soggy around the edges after a while like they do too, but I’m not as full of water as a bath so there’s not really too much danger of that happening. But Larry found me (I found Larry) the night I had that stupid daydream. I’m a graduate student, I was a graduate student, in a Masters program

in Literary Translation, all the way up in the United States, there are not very many of these in that country, I'll let you guess where this one is. What they tell you but you don't understand is that you teach a lot in this program, you can sign up for these classes, you go to workshop and shit, but what becomes clear if it wasn't already is that you really will spend most of your time here teaching Spanish to gringos. Hola, Professor Jon. Hola, Mike. Cómo te pasó la prueba. Malísima. He's right, I think, it did go shitty for him, and so on. So basically all day, from when I wake up until the sun goes down, I'm in my little shared office in the foreign-languages building, Phillips Hall, it's the tallest building for miles around for some reason, a rectangular cement cuboid rising straight out of the ground, an ugly god on the windswept plain. And I'm in the basement, my office has windows in one corner up by the ceiling so that there's theoretically some natural light, but the windows happen to look out under a big thick ramp so I can't see shit. On the brightest days I can sort of tell that it's light out by pressing my face against the glass and peering out all the way to the side. So no natural light but they do let the cold in, brutal cold, like don't-breathe-with-your-mouth-open-or-your-teeth-will-freeze-off cold, and so we get these flowerings of ice crystals on the inside of the glass, which are beautiful for about two seconds until they melt and then trickle down to the floor below, and pool around the radiator, causing the floor to sag and looking like piss. We should keep a mop in there, I've thought before, but I'm not going to do it, Germaine's not going to do it, that's my office-mate, she's a sweetheart, teaches French, she's not in my program but in the French MA, I think she's great and should go for a PhD, but she won't mop up the puddle, neither will Ed, our third office-mate, I never see him here but he leaves stuff behind on his desk, ungraded quizzes and candy bar wrappers and in the drawers probably used tissues, I wouldn't know, I've never looked in there, but if I did I'm sure that's what I'd find, he probably keeps them and uses them again and again. I have no idea what he looks like because I never see

him, which is the weirdest part because I’m always here, I’m here right now and I was here that night that I was beginning to tell about, when I couldn’t sleep and went upstairs for a walk. That night I had just finished grading a test, and it was already 9 o’clock by the time I got started on my seminar reading for the next day. The reading was about some guys named Humbart and the encyclopedic nature of semiosis. Some real grad school shit, as a friend of mine once said. I was lost in a mind-numbing discussion of “the ground” when I fell asleep on my desk. When I woke, I didn’t know what time it was. Phillips locks from the outside automatically, after 9 pm all of the doors are suddenly locked, you can’t get in, and sometimes I sort of wish it locked from the inside, too, so I could really say I am literally physically trapped here, the way that I feel like I’m trapped here, that I act like I’m trapped here, day and night in my fluorescent-bright, dirty office. When I fall asleep like this I go walk around to wake back up. The first floor is kept lit all night but from the second floor up they let it go dark, so I go up there, I walk around through the hallways letting my eyes adjust and letting the stillness and darkness wash over me. It begins to feel cool, physically, I doubt that it’s because the temperature of the building actually changes, highly unlikely, they’re pretty strict about never doing that out here, it’s something about how the presence of stimuli which are normally fucking ruining my life with their insistent omnipresence diminishes that makes my body think something or perhaps itself can finally cool down. Once I’ve taken a lap through the hallways I go into this converted lecture hall. It’s the strangest room in the building, not in itself particularly weird but it’s so at odds with the rest of Phillips, I think it used to be an atrium of sorts, the floors and several of the walls are made of this nice deep walnut, there’s a mahogany carpet on the floor where thirty or so old wooden chairs sit, none of those folding desks that are so ubiquitous, and no elevation change either, so if a tall guy sits in the front everyone is fucked. They all face the only point of elevation in the room which is a small stage,

with a black metal podium, behind which stands a brick wall and which is surrounded by (and this is what’s really incredible) two banistered staircases that rise gently on either side of the stage, curve away from it and then begin to converge, until they each dissolve into the wall behind it. That is to say, the wood they’re made of is cut off neatly at the plane formed by the brick wall—but it looks as though they run right through it, and that if you were able to see on the other side of the wall you’d see them continue, spiraling up to some other destination. That’s not true, of course. I don’t really know what’s behind that wall but I think it’s either classrooms or offices or the outside of the building. What I do know, or at least what I’ve been able to surmise after my many nights of somnambulance here, is that the bricks it’s made up of are the only bricks in the building. The rest of Phillips is polished, hospital-white floors, disinfectible surfaces, metal doors, fluorescent lighting, linoleums and alloys and plastics. Maybe some carpet, here and there.

It seems so unlikely to me that this room could have been built there at the same time of the rest of the building that I assume it wasn’t. I assume it’s the trace of a building that used to be here, though it’s not too much less absurd that they decided to keep this one room from it, and its strange features, and above all its staircases that go nowhere. But what’s most operative about this room to me when I go night-walking is that it’s actually another order of magnitude darker than anywhere else. All of the other lecture halls and classrooms have at least some blinking technological infrastructure, a light coming from the fire-safety exit sign, a hum from the giant yet incredibly slow computer used to run so many inane powerpoints, some leak of the safety-bearing fluorescence of the nearby stairwell. When I walk into this room, and I let the heavy door fall shut behind me, I have to really grope all the way to one of the chairs which I place myself in, they’re hard and uncomfortable, and I sit for minutes or really who fucking knows how long and look up at the brick wall in front of me, I don’t know if it’s really there, of course, because I can’t see it,

but I know which direction to look roughly because of the orientation of the chairs, and because I've now walked into there in the dark so many times, and that's important, I think, the experience of looking for something that you can't really know if it's there, trusting in your orientation to know which way you've got to be looking, even if you can't see it, even if you can't make out the detail of the bricks, the pattern of diverging and converging lines made by their mortar, the trace of the years eating away at the uniformity of their rectangular shapes, one fallen chip at a time, a chip then swept away by a janitor at some point before I get here and brought to a trash can and then released into the flow of waste materials that lead it all the way back to some warming farting landfill miles away. Eventually in the absence of signal that is the near-complete darkness between myself and the wall my eyes start to play flashing designs of jagged line and flickering sparks as they do when I shut them, but here while they're wide open, and I play the game of trying to focus on these ephemeral objects and look around in this non-field that takes up the space where my vision used to be and maybe my ears start to ring in the silence too and I wish I could turn off my fingertips and sore back and just become feelingless, floating in multi-sense static. Instead I start to get uncomfortable and I then usually feel my way up the stairs and sit with my back against the unlikely brick wall and wait for the darkness and silence to settle back down around me after my motion, and look down at where I was sitting below, indistinguishable from the view I had just before.

And then many such nights I finally grow tired, and I either go fall asleep in my office or bundle up and go back out into the cold and go home. But on some nights, like the night I found Larry or Larry found me or I found Giuseppe or Giuseppe found me, and they wrapped their meaty fists around me and their great wide mouths howled and slathered with glee, on nights like this one I'll keep walking. Sometimes the cool liquid quiet of even the darkest most unlikely room isn't

enough to stop me from wanting to wander through halls. Sometimes I'd eventually rise, my stiff back the guiding principle of all such movements, and make my way back through the pitch and into the hallway, which now after so much darkness might as well be in full daylight.

That night I made it to the top floor. I don't think I went straight there—nor did I progress nicely from the second, to the third and fourth and fifth in that order before reaching the last, I never do that—but I may have went up to the fourth first, then back down to the third, then walked around the basement a bit and maybe hovered outside my office, thought about going back in, but then decided not to, let myself be pulled instead back down the quiet hall with all of the closed doors and then back up the staircase which I ultimately use without thought or purpose. The hallways are not quite as still and quiet as that lecture hall I was in before, but they do offer the advantage of unobstructed walking. Plus, I think, there's something especially calming about all the closed doors. I like to think about all the people that could be on the other side of them, but that probably aren't... but what if they were? I'm always surprised there aren't more graduate students that wander like me. Maybe they just hang out in their offices with the lights off, but don't leave. I'm picturing the rooms around me overgrown with silent life, laptop screens in the dark like bioluminescence in an unknown sea, and the really silent, still rooms that I stop outside of are where the most crazy shit is going down, people masturbating, fucking in the quiet, faces concentrated with grim urgency, it's 3 o'clock in the morning and I have to teach at 8:30 tomorrow but you'd better get over here so we can screw in complete silence in my office on the fourth floor of Phillips, each determined thrust or rub or heave like the laying of one more brick. I doubt they come.

But somehow in this speculative wandering I ended up on the top floor, and this evening I was surprised to find that the layout of this floor was different than the rest. Floors three through

five of Phillips hall are shaped like imperfect figure-eights, with a dollop of extra space on one end which provides access to bathrooms, staircases and elevators. The imperfection is where the meeting point of the two circles that form the eight would be: there is a noticeable dip at the midpoints of each of the long halls, which tend towards one another, but instead of provided clear passage through they connect in a large classroom that makes up the center of the floor. But that night, as I rounded the bend out from the stairwell into the first hall, I found that there was no such classroom there, but rather a clear passage through to the other side. The outlines of the walls flanking it were just barely visible in the night. When I walked through it, I almost stopped because I thought I smelled something: a faint but persistent rot, like failing flesh or human shit. I continued in the direction I had been coming from, away from the stairs, ostensibly still parallel to the hallway I'd been coming down to reach this one and which, had I not turned into this unexpected passageway, should have continued straight to meet this one at their mutual end. There the passageway I'd been walking in before would have turned right; and the one I was walking in now should have turned left. But it didn't. The darkness was enough such that I didn't notice the difference until I walked into it. I suppose, lacking information from my eyes, my brain had gone ahead and taken some liberties in constructing its model of the space before me. I followed that model without thinking too hard about it, reaching the end of the hall, lost in some other thought, surely, whatever it is I think about on these walks, and, pacing as I was with my hands clasping one another elegantly behind my back, I nearly cracked my forehead open against the lefthand-side wall that rose unexpectedly before me. Slightly dazed, I stood there for a minute and thought, must be a dead end. But then, turning to my right, I found that it wasn't. There was a passage leading in that direction, I could now see, and what's more, the end of it some ten yards away seemed as though it might have been illuminated by just the faintest quotient of light.

This passageway greatly perplexed my understanding of the geography of this building. I was certain that the corner I was standing in was also the corner of the building, based on the fact that it should have been directly above—and here I had to think for a second, imagining the block the building was on and the cardinal directions orienting the campus—the north-eastern-most corner of all of the other floors I’d so thoroughly explored, beyond which, if there was any more building than several layers of wall and insulation, it was certainly not accessible by the means of exploration available to me—and I was just as certain that the direction this passageway went in should in fact be outside of the building’s limits, straight into thin air. But perhaps there was something I didn’t know about Phillips. Or perhaps I misunderstood the building’s space, or perhaps this top floor was layed out deceptively, or perhaps even the insularity of Phillips that I had taken for granted was a mistake: for although it was the tallest building around, there were plenty of others surrounding it that were only one or two stories shorter, and high up there in the dark winds and blowing snow there could easily be a passageway between it and one of its neighbors that I hadn’t seen. There were plenty of such crossways between other buildings I’d seen around on campus. But none of this mattered, really, maybe I’d find out later, maybe there’d be an unlocked classroom or a window at the end of one of the halls around that bend that I now walked towards, the bend illuminated with the faintest of light.

The hallway that I turned into was much the same as the ones I was coming from. Lined by gunmetal gray office doors, it led itself to another corner, from which trickled the faintest quotient of fluorescent light. Around that corner was another, just hardly more brightly-lit hallway, and then another. This series continued for some time: one passageway leading cleanly into another, with only a very few forks, and each of these easy to navigate: one direction would continue the pattern of increasing light, and the other would have at its end a turn into comparative

darkness. I followed the lightening paths with diligence. Though I knew then and I know now that light doesn't behave like this, I couldn't help but think as I walked that it was moving around corners the way water might from a weak source, a little less dribbling down each bend than the one before. Inversely proportional to the decay in light was the growing certainty of the smell, now horrible, now certainly shit. Each turn was bringing me further and further into a space that didn't make sense within my understanding of Phillips, or the buildings surrounding it, or really any possible architecture of any building or even floor. As it grew brighter, I could make out in better detail the gunmetal gray of the office doors, adorned as they all were with names, either carved into steel placards for faculty or written on paper for graduate students. But the more light there was, the greater the state of decay I found them and their materials to be in, the carved names fading on their slots as on untended graves, and the paper slips becoming ragged and yellow despite their sheathes of glass.

This was just like the night I found Larry. Larry was here when he shouldn't be, and I was there when and where I should never have been, and from our monstrous union came a promise and a text and an author I am translating now who may or may not exist. But it was not the only night I went down this hall. On a night just like that one, the trap of Larry's office door wasn't open. That night when I walked by his office I took the darker route. It took me around another bend, to another intersection, but at this one both directions I could go in were equally dim of light. Maybe the growing intensity of the stench was finally building up to a point where I had decided I could go no further. Maybe I was getting tired and had decided to go back. If it was the latter, then I'm not sure what I was thinking, because I didn't turn exactly back the way I'd come: I turned into a different, darker hallway. Perhaps I was experimenting to see if the linear change in intensity

of light and nasty smell determined the direction from where I had started, and not just the other way around. One’s own motivations can confound oneself at times like these.

In any case, I followed the increasing darkness, coolness and cleanness of the air for a while, but did not end up back on the sixth floor of Phillips. Not that I could recognize, at least. The hallways I passed through got darker and darker, and the name tags on the doorways, increasingly legible—Carlos Antonio Monfantana, TA; Nissam Bernard Morel, MFA; Enrique Velloidolin Hermansastro, MFA, PhD—until after a while it was basically pitch black. Suffice it to say that I had lost track of time a little bit while I was walking. I began to move more slowly, with arms outstretched to guide me around the turns, until I noticed that I had been walking for a while longer than I usually expected to without encountering a turn. After a while of this I reached out to either side of me to feel for the hallway’s boundaries, only to find that they weren’t there. I turned around. Some distance behind me, difficult to determine, I saw the faintest patch of light; perhaps it hadn’t yet been really, truly devoid of light in those last few passages after all. Other than this, I could see absolutely nothing around me.

I sat down. The floor felt like cool linoleum under my hands, one that I imagined could fit well enough the visual image of the floors of Phillips’ halls that I had in my mind, although at the time I can’t say I really had another sensation of their touch to compare it against, as I avoided touching those much-trodden floors with my bare hands whenever possible, which was basically all the time. Unlike the darkness in the wood-paneled lecture hall I frequent, in this one my eyes didn’t play their shimmery patterns, for whatever reason. With the exception of the faint spot of light which pointed me back to where I’d come from, I was surrounded by a visual field of complete, unnuanced darkness.

Well, what’s a guy to do in a situation like this? I thought about going to sleep, but that seemed like a bad idea. I thought about where I was, wondering if this was even still Phillips. I thought about the immensity and the silence of the building below me, assuming I was still there, its sweet contradiction of the daily mindnumbing idiocy blossoming into calm. I then thought about who else might be downstairs; I thought of the other quiet walkers and lurkers like me, I thought of Larry. I thought of the other graduate students or young professors I’d imagined fucking in their offices downstairs. I stayed on that thought for a while. Then I realized I had an erection. I looked around and thought: Why not? What’s preventing me from masturbating right now? So I masturbated. I thought about the faceless, nameless forms below, climbing onto the same office chairs as I had slept on earlier, as I had daydreamed on through the night, fingers clawing into shoulders and genital-studded pelvises thrumming. As I was coming, I got up onto my knees and tucked my legs behind me so that I wouldn’t get any cum on my slacks—at this rate, an awareness of time coming back to me strangely and momentarily, as it sometimes does, I realized I’d probably be teaching tomorrow morning in the same clothes I was wearing right now—and as I was getting to my knees and beginning to come, I felt the brush of what could have only been a hand against the bare skin of my forearm. Naturally I freaked the fuck out. I half-jumped, half-fell away from the direction the touch had come from, unable to contain a shriek, pants still open, semen still spurting out of me, unable to stop despite my hasty and automatic stuffing of my junk back into my boxers, which were now swiftly filling up with the stinking stuff. What the fuck! I shouted, and then, Hello? and then, as I got to my feet, pants now back up and buttoned, Is there anybody there? And then I backed towards the light source and found that thank God I could still see it, and decided to sprint towards it, decided might not be quite the right word, overdoing the level of thought and agency that was active at the time, but you know what I mean, and then I fell, flat onto

my face, arms stretched out like a cartoon, suddenly dizzy, I guess it's not so easy to run in the dark, even if you're in an obstacle-less, totally open space like I thought I was; and then I had the thought: well what if I wasn't? Really in an obstacle-less space, I mean, and that of course bummed me the fuck out, I imagined not only wooden crates and whoopee cushions and other comical objects placed at my feet to trip me, but rows of people standing around me, beautiful women, probably, and strong, confident men, and cute enbys with knowing smirks, Larry and Guiseppe and my officemates and my ex-roommates back in Oaxaca and my high-school girlfriend all giggling at me when I tripped and watching me now slow into a cautious walk, stilted a little from where I'd fallen on my knee, blood maybe running down my face and neck from my nose, cum drying in my shorts, and honestly, as my gait hardened into a limp towards the dim rectangle of bright light before me, which was growing as I approached it, thank God, but not fast enough, I was doing everything I could not to shit myself, my guts were crying out to be released, it was like a mole was trapped inside my asshole, tunneling away, snuffling out of me, and if I'd had enough hands to do it I'd be pressing my fingers into all of these holes of mine, trying to bind up the parts of me that were leaking out and literally hold myself together as I limped and bled and shit and came my way out of that room into the hallway's dim light.