

# To Penetrate and Be Penetrated

by Cristina Morales

Translated by Kevin Gerry Dunn

Being translated is like being penetrated by a foreign tongue. It's a leap of faith I take with my translators, just like when I throw myself into the arms of new lovers. There's no shared code between people exchanging their first caresses, only a will to understand. When I get out of bed in the morning, it's that will to understand that keeps me from burning it all down: the city where I live (Barcelona), the apartment where I sleep, the house I'm buying, family, banks, notary publics, airports, hotels, injuries, drugs, dance and, most of all, writing and literature. I only know and can only write about love.

That was what my erstwhile teacher—Spanish-Argentine writer Andrés Neuman—used to say when I was a teenager and he had just turned thirty. Neuman said: whoever believes in translation believes in love. One time I told him about a foreign boy (a German, in fact) with whom I claimed to be madly in love.

“What do you mean by ‘madly’?” he asked, searching, as all good teachers do, for a raw nerve to strike. Neuman knew as well as I did that I was using a cliché, a euphemism, a schmaltzy dipshiticism that spared me from a more earnest expression of my feelings. It's a writer's sin, that kind of sloth.

I don't remember what I said back, but after hearing my teacher's incisive question, I threw myself into penning a response. I wrote a text called [Antes loba](#) which, after a reread today (it has yet to be translated), strikes me as extraordinarily timely. I'm clearheaded as hell in it, in possession of that irrepressible wisdom about love and desire you only have when you're twentynothing years old. I'm not being sarcastic.

“Could you tell me more about what you mean when you say ‘whoever believes in translation believes in love’?” I asked Neuman after he first shared his maxim.

Back then I had only published one story collection, with a small publisher in my hometown, and the idea of being translated was one planet in the then-distant literary star system, a system my young teacher was just entering. I remember his answer perfectly. He said some people

don't read translated literature, or they read it warily, because they think the work's essence is lost when it's carried into a foreign language. These are the same people who think of love in essentialist terms: you can only call it love if two beings have entered a state of perfect mutual understanding. Either the lovebirds get confused about who's who and "the two become one flesh"—another, more Biblical dipshitticism, but just as schmaltzy as "madly in love"—or else it's not love, it's not anything.

Neuman's view of love, which is now mine too, is closer to the act of translation. Fidelity to the original text can never be absolute, just as reciprocity can never be absolute in the act of love. Lovers are distinct human beings, radically different from one another, just as languages are radically different. Even languages that look and sound similar are radically different. Even lovers who seem like two peas in a pod are radically different peas. If there is such a thing as essence, the essence is difference. Translation and love aren't about minimizing that difference, but making it shine! A lover enables me to be me, I can be genuine around her or him or them (singular) or them (plural). They're spaces of freedom. Love doesn't nullify difference: it empowers and embraces it. The target language is generous, like a lover who's spreading his legs wide to receive the source, or one with her erection poised to act. The target language says to the original, "Come with me, we'll give each other what we don't yet have, trust me: you have to surrender yourself to receive."

Reading translated literature is like going to a peep show, or better yet, it's like being waved over to an orgy and deciding to just watch—intimately yet publicly, as others give love—and by your mere presence, you yourself are loving and being loved in turn. As a translated author, I invite you to witness the BDSM sessions I've shared with my translators into German, French, Greek, Slovenian, Brazilian, Italian, Portuguese, Polish, English. All are welcome, we have love to spare. There are reasons not to burn it all down when we get up in the morning.

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