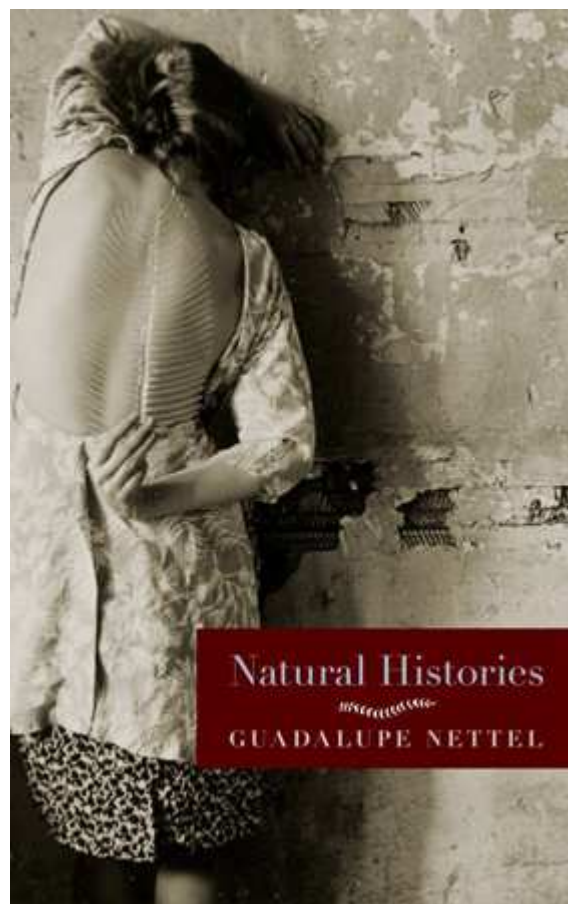


J. T. Lichtenstein on translating Guadalupe Nettel's *Natural Histories*

Translated from the Spanish by J. T. Lichtenstein (Seven Stories Press, 2014)



The simplest words and phrases are for me the most demanding to translate; in Guadalupe Nettel's writing they abound. Written Spanish is at times full of wonderfully, befuddlingly complicated sentences. The phrases that turn in on themselves, that need to be unraveled so it's clear what's an independent clause and what's subordinate, those are the phrases that—though at first they put up a struggle—ultimately submit to a sturdy English rendering. With these phrases I can be crafty and rough, wrestling with them until I am able to pin them down, unleashing the necessary syntactic violence upon them. But it's phrases with a simple, immediate clarity that give me pause.

These have to be handled more delicately, because there is something so very natural about them, unconstructed and organic, and so all the more breakable. I fear they would be crushed by the violence of a forceful translation. Nettel's writing feels fragile in my hands. But that is how I am able to go about translating it: by touch, by feeling her writing and the creative process behind it, feeling out possible translations.

Her prose is like something found in nature: an animal following its instincts, a plant that unfurls tender leaves outward as it grows, a lichen that quietly creeps over the bark of a tree, an expanding frost slowly patterning a windowpane as the temperature drops and becomes crueler. In her story "Fungus," Nettel portrays a woman's metamorphosis into a spiritual parasite so delicately, it's like watching a larva transform into a beetle.

The change is drastic and repugnant, but so very surreptitious and naïve that we don't even realize it is taking place until the end of the story, when the process is complete. This, for me, is the most hauntingly beautiful part of the story: the desperate sadness of a situation eerily relatable. Translating Nettel's writing is a similar kind of creeping, unfurling, instinctive transformation.

The tales Nettel spins in *Natural Histories* dwell in perfect symbiosis with her style. They explore the animal kingdom, engage with it, and quite comfortably reside there. For they are first and foremost about people, about their lives and relationships and behaviors and emotions—and what are human beings, if not animals? In these stories, various specimens of the natural world serve as mirrors for the human condition, and they force us to confront the reality of our animal impulses, whether we succumb to or suppress them. A couple expecting their first child comes into possession of a pair of Siamese fighting fish. As life in their tiny apartment starts to feel suffocatingly similar to one confined to the stagnant waters of a fishbowl, they react as their violent-natured pets might. In the other stories, a family abandons social and personal prejudices, as well as morality, coming together to fight off a cockroach infestation; a young woman struggles with an unexpected pregnancy while watching a cat bear her own litter with acceptance and determination; an adulterous love affair takes on a life of its own in the form of a strange fungus growing on the lovers' bodies; and a man deals with the pain of being far from his origins and his beloved by inflicting the same sufferings on a snake.

These stories, in a sense, are translations of experiences, moving not between languages, but species. Translation wouldn't be possible were it not for the universal ability of *language* to express human loneliness, joy, anger. Even if we have forgotten or buried our animal intuition and instinct, even if overthinking has estranged us from them, the seamlessness with which Nettel is able to *translate* animal traits into human behaviors is testament to something still animal in the marrow of our being.

Nettel is a bilingual writer, having mastered French along with her native Spanish, and it shows in her writing. And not only in her use of language, which, with its simplicity and webbing and subtle strangeness, hints at another linguistic world, but also in the narratives themselves. Part of her novel, *The Body Where I was Born*, based on memories of her childhood, takes place in Aix-en-Provence, and two of the stories in *Natural Histories* are set in Paris—which to me means they take place in French. Her characters insult one another in French, they live in French houses and eat French foods at French restaurants, tell us their fears and desires and pains in French. But this, of course, is all *written* in Spanish. So even when reading the original text, we feel as though we are in a translation.

I happen to speak French, not nearly so well as Nettel, but well enough to imagine those stories unfolding in French, and this drove certain decisions about my translation. For example, in the story "The Marriage of the Red Fish," the narrator goes out one morning for a glass of orange juice. In the Spanish, she sits down in a *bar*. English equivalents of this include a *bar* and a *café*. But the word *café* exists in Spanish and Nettel didn't use it (and *café crème* appears a line below, so the need to avoid an echo came into play). Spanish and English "bar" are cognates, but it wouldn't make sense to an American reader for someone to have orange juice and a croissant at a bar in the morning. It needed to be some place that would serve breakfast fare, yet also might offer alcohol, as the Spanish word suggests. So I went with a French equivalent of the Spanish *bar*: *brasserie*. It helped the text achieve a certain level of Frenchness, too, as the croissant has been so lovingly adopted into an English-speaking world that it wouldn't much help a reader situate herself in France.

Earlier in the story, during an argument a man condemns his wife for being impossible to please," ending his outburst with "*Me cuesta creerlo.*" Literally, this means, "I find it hard to believe." But I felt I had to figure out what this might be in French before I could find the right English rendering, for after all, it is uttered by a Frenchman in exasperated French. The English "I find it hard to believe" does not convey the tenseness of the situation or the character's temper, nor is it quite colloquial enough. I kept hearing, "*C'est incroyable,*" a phrase often employed in French as well as English ("It's unbelievable") to express disapproval and criticism, rather than actual disbelief. It was easy for me to imagine Nettel's original wording as a translation from French reality into Spanish literary language.

Paris is more than a happenstance setting for "The Marriage of the Red Fish"; the places, streets, sites, even the local weather are integral to the characters' moods, actions, and interactions. In the Spanish, almost all proper names remain in French—*Boulevard Richard-Lenoir*, however, became *bulevar Richard-Lenoir*. Interestingly, *bulevar* is phonetically closer to the French *Boulevard* for Spanish speakers, being a castilianization of the French word, which is a compelling explanation for why Nettel translated this word, but not *rue* (street) as *calle*. *Boulevard* is an English loan word from the French (who borrowed it from the Dutch), so I didn't have to make any decision about how to translate it. I did, however, determine to keep the names of places as they would appear in French. I did not capitalize the word *rue* even as the name of a street, nor did I italicize it as a foreign word. In the Spanish, Nettel has *la rivera izquierda*, but rather than the *Left Bank*, I used the *Rive Gauche*, because that is the term the narrator would have used. I tried, as best I could, to make the English prose and the French names flow together as a single language. I wanted the reader to feel, to some degree, as if they were reading French written in English, just as I had read French written in Spanish.

Still, when I sent a draft of the translation to Nettel, she was concerned that the first story was saturated with *Is*. I could understand her concern; Spanish is a 'pro-drop' language, meaning the subject of an independent clause is implied by the verb, making the noun redundant and therefore often omissible. French and English are non-pro-drop languages, so every verb needs a noun. Nettel's Spanish first-person narrative had indeed yielded an English text heavy with first person singular pronouns, and this was even after my editor had me rework a few areas he also felt to be too *I-dense*. I assured Nettel I would go through it again and remove as many as I could, and it proved to be a delicious challenge. To take out that one word meant distancing the English translation even further from the original Spanish, in structure and syntax, in changing parts of speech, and it encouraged me to make bolder moves in my work. In accommodating a text written in a pro-drop language, at times it made more sense to gently push the English language away from its conventions—though never sacrificing flow or naturalness—so that Nettel's prose wasn't making all the concessions in my translation. To my knowledge, *Natural Histories* hasn't been translated into French yet, but I'm curious to see what the French translator will do with this lovely little linguistic conundrum, see what they do with their language to better receive the Spanish.

We refer to a writer as "master" of their language when they have dominated it, learned how to manipulate and contort it, flout its laws and bend it to their will. They play with it. This is how style is created, and created inimitable. Why, then, don't we more often apply the same strategies to translation? Are masters of style in their own languages doomed to have only smoothed-out versions in other languages out of a concern for readability? Should a translator not also flout the laws of English and command it to

adapt? As Nettel explores in *The Body Where I was Born*, adaptation accommodate new, or hostile, environments—is indispensable for survival. It is how the resilient cockroach has managed to stick around for so many millions of years. For a foreign text to fit comfortably in the literary landscape of a new language, it too must adapt. But it wouldn't hurt for that new language to adapt a little as well.

Survival is, ultimately, the highest goal. A text, if it is to find readers outside of its original language, must survive translation—something that demands careful consideration. Careful consideration, and yes, instinct, for just as an animal knows instinctively what it needs to survive, translators also have instincts, and we need them as much as we do our human ability to analyze, interpret, and create. Perhaps that is true of all human beings in certain situations. As *Natural Histories* subtly reveals, we may not be so removed from our basic instincts—those that serve to protect us—as we might think. Nettel's work reminds us that when we are threatened, it is in our biological makeup to fight for our own survival, be it emotional or physical. In the stories collected in *Natural Histories* we see ourselves, and we see that in love we are parasitic, when trapped we seek to escape, in cohabitation we become cruel, when attacked we fight tooth and claw to defend ourselves, laying aside moral judgment. In misery we seek like company; in loneliness a sense of belonging; in hostility refuge; and when injured we lick our wounds. And in our ugliness, our repulsiveness, our baseness, there is beauty, for these are the aspects of our nature that have ensured our survival. ♣