The Stranger
Author:
Olga Merino

READER'S NAME: Annette Bridges

Olga Merino's novel *La Forastera* ("The Stranger/Outsider") is set in a desolate region of rural Spain. The book has been characterized as a contemporary Western; it is also a sustained introspection on the part of a solitary middle-aged woman looking back on her personal and family history. The protagonist, Angela, is fiercely attached to her dogs, her shotgun, her childhood home surrounded by olive and walnut trees, and the memories of her dead. The latter include almost everyone who has played an important role in her life, with the common thread being suicide. Angie interacts with a handful of acquaintances who, like her, exist on the margins of society (as immigrants or eccentrics); she occasionally frequents the local pub, but mostly spends her time alone, describing herself in particular as someone who neither experiences nor feels *calor de madre*, or maternal affection.

La Forastera is a bleak novel indeed. However, Angie's rejection of performative femininity, societal hierarchies and more generally the trappings of bourgeois life give her dignity and personal power. The appeal of this type of protagonist, along with the theme of the effects of rural migration to the city and the aforementioned elements of the "Western" genre, mean that translating this novel into English would be an intriguing and rewarding endeavor. The novel's setting reflects Spaniards' mass abandonment of small villages in the 1950's. There are few culturally specific aspects that would present obstacles to translation, although a subtext consisting of allusions to British rock songs could come across as trite or hokey in English. "Angie" is, in fact, the nickname given to Angela in her youth by her British lover, a gifted painter named Nigel, and it refers to the Rolling Stones song of that name. Further references to lyrics by the Dire Straits, Rod Stewart and others are intended to provide insights into Angie's experiences, emotions and encounters during the time she spent in London, as are oddly specific references to the culturally oppressive milieu of Margaret Thatcher's England during that era. The novel's prose, however, remains clean and spare as Angie relates the various epochs of her personal story, and the dialogue is well-placed and well-integrated; Angie's generally brief conversations with others serve to express the essence of a particular relationship or situation.

By far the most striking aspect of this novel, and a reason why its translation would be a fascinating and pleasurable project, is the astounding number of evocative nouns Merino uses in her descriptions of the setting – the plants, outbuildings and features of the landscape. Angie's narrative unfolds amidst rock rose and wild olives, gorse and cornflowers, prickly pear, thistles and ilex. The buildings that dot the hillsides include the olive-oil mill (*almazara*) and a pig shed (*zahúrda*), along with a rich assortment of huts, shacks and lean-tos (*choza*, *chabola*, alpende, galpón, *tinglado* and many more). I imagine that most readers of this book are first drawn in by the Spanish-language edition's beautiful cover, which depicts a weathered, rustic, falling-down fence and tall dry grasses, bathed in a harsh but melancholy light.

The juxtaposition of an existentially bleak, smoothly narrated storyline with such rich descriptions of the natural and material world makes Merino's novel a prime candidate for translation. Given the current world mood, translating a Western into English, especially one with a female protagonist whose view of human companionship and society is so unflinchingly bleak, seems like an appropriate project.

Having described Merino's lavish use of nouns, I allow myself in closing to mention an equally evocative adjective that she uses repeatedly: *achicharrado*(and variations thereof), or "scorched." This word, and the verb from which it is derived, convey both a sense of the setting and a hint of the plot. I hope English-speaking readers will soon be able to experience this novel's *andurriales*– Angie's particular, godforsaken neck of the woods, a place that is both scorched and resilient.