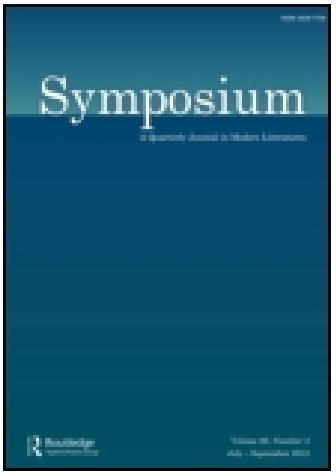

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In the First Soot-Gray Light: Translating Rodolfo Walsh's "Worldly Offices"

The process of translating Rodolfo Walsh's short story "Los oficios terrestres" ("Worldly Offices") into English presents numerous interpretive and stylistic challenges. This essay discusses various strategies used in the translation of Walsh's text into English. It is informed by Antoine Berman's theoretical paradigm, which rejects the Platonic figure of translation as "an embellishing restitution of meaning" in favor of "labor on the letter," a practice that seeks to go beyond semantic restitution to restore such vehicles of expression as rhythm, linguistic and discursive patterns, idioms, and the underlying signifiers that constitute the subtext. Issues addressed include representations of power and resistance, the ironic use of ecclesiastical language to satirize the oppressive authority of the Catholic Church, and the interplay of oppositions in narrative structure, theme, imagery, register, and language.

Keywords: *Argentinean literature, Antoine Berman, Catholic Church, Irish in Argentina, "Los oficios terrestres," Ricardo Piglia, translation, Rodolfo Walsh*

Rodolfo Walsh (1927–77) is one of the foremost Argentinean writers of the second half of the twentieth century. Renowned as a canonical writer in Argentina, he is well known for his compelling fiction, investigative journalism, and testimonies, and his experimentation with stylistic innovations has greatly influenced other Latin American writers. His groundbreaking testimonies led the way to that genre's boom in the 1960s and anticipated the genre of new journalism. The recent publication in 2013 of a new collection of his complete stories, *Rodolfo Walsh, cuentos completos*, edited by Ricardo Piglia, attests to his stature and the continued relevance of his work to a contemporary readership. A brilliant writer who exemplified the ideal of the politically committed intellectual, Rodolfo Walsh disappeared in 1977, one day after sending an open letter to the news media denouncing Argentina's military dictatorship.

"Worldly Offices" is the second story in a trilogy about a group of boys, the descendents of poor Irish immigrants to Argentina, who have been sent to a provincial Irish Catholic boarding school, and draws in part on Walsh's own childhood experience. The first story, "Irish after a Cat," recounts the arrival of a new student, nicknamed The Cat, who is rejected as an outsider and persecuted by the other boys. In "Worldly Offices," the boys are visited by the Ladies of St. Joseph Society, the founders of their school, and are treated to a splendid meal in honor of

the Feast of Corpus Christi. The abundance of food and the demonstrations of affection they receive on that day contrast sharply with their everyday reality of hunger, loneliness, and abuse. The next day, The Cat and a younger boy named Dashwood are charged with carrying a heavy rubbish bin, overflowing with waste, out to the garbage dump, a task that is experienced as a great ordeal by Dashwood, who reaches the limits of his endurance. The register of the language used to narrate this relatively inconsequential plot is highly literary, a contrast that, for Ricardo Piglia, produces an effect that is both ironic and moving: *"El tono épico le da a esas pequeñas historias un aire legendario y casi mítico: una comunidad de niños ha encontrado un narrador capaz de preservar—en el estilo—la emoción y la intensidad de la existencia"* (12) (The epic tone lends these small stories a legendary and almost mythic quality: a community of children has found a narrator able to preserve—in his style—the emotion and intensity of their existence [my translation]).

The plot of "Worldly Offices" evolves against the implicit historical background of the years immediately preceding the ascendency of Juan Perón in the 1940s. During this period, political power was consolidated in the hands of a notoriously corrupt and repressive ruling oligarchy, and the story presents a fierce and wittily ironic critique of the oppressive role of the Catholic Church in reinforcing the hierarchy of an inherently unjust social and economic class structure. Power emerges as a fundamental theme in the story: how power is exercised on the body through hunger and violence, how it is challenged and resisted, and how the latent power of the collective has yet to be realized.

The challenges of rendering Walsh's dense, rhythmic, and allusive prose into English are manifold, and I have been mindful of the work of Antoine Berman, which served as a theoretical touchstone for me as I worked my way through this translation. In his essay, "Translation and the Trials of the Foreign," Berman observes that the theories of semantic transfer that have dominated the history of Western translation hark back to a Platonic figure of translation, the object of which is "an embellishing restitution of meaning," in a movement that separates "spirit and letter, sense and word, content and form, the sensible and the non-sensible" (296). This approach to translation, asserts Berman, has encouraged the development of certain "deforming tendencies" that work systematically to alter or erase vehicles of expression in a literary text, such as rhythm, linguistic and discursive patterns, idioms, and the underlying signifiers that comprise the subtext. Instead, Berman advocates a translation practice that goes beyond semantic restitution through "labor on the letter," which, he argues, "restores the particular signifying process of works (which is more than their meaning) and [. . .] transforms the translating language" (297). Françoise Massardier-Kenney summarizes Berman's position succinctly as "respect for the integrity of a literary work where the translator seeks to attend to what is expressed *in* the means of expression of a foreign text (rather than *by* the means of expression) while preserving the character of his or her own language" (ix). My translation of "Worldly Offices" evolved as I examined it with a critical eye to some of the issues raised in Berman's thesis. The questions it led me to ask often pushed the work in directions it might not otherwise have gone and, I would hope, to a closer approximation of Walsh's text.

One of the principal underlying structures Walsh employs in this narrative is opposition. The plot unfolds in counterpoint between the day of the feast, when the boys enjoy an overabundance of food and attention, and the following morning's disposal of the waste it has generated. Indeed, the dominant metaphor emerges in this onerous chore, which epitomizes the bleak, oppressive normality of their daily lives: carrying this burden is their *oficio terrestre*. The narrative

scaffolding, moreover, rests on a series of interwoven thematic oppositions that juxtapose images of abundance and waste, oppression and resistance, the material and the spiritual, affection and violence, camaraderie and isolation. These underlie the tensions between the characters, who in turn are subject to inner conflict: Dashwood is divided between "a caressing hand and a tearful, disenchanted body"; The Walrus suffers "indignity in the midst of acclaim"; The Cat makes a gesture of solidarity in spite of himself.

A crucial opposition is also signaled in the title of the story, "*Los oficios terrestres,*" which is used in contrast to *los oficios divinos,* and echoes throughout the text in various permutations. While *divino* in another context might be translated as sacred, holy, heavenly, or spiritual, "the Divine Office" refers specifically to the daily canonical prayers recited in the Catholic liturgy. The polyvalence of *oficio,* which is commonly used not only in the religious sense (office, rite, ceremony, liturgy), but also in the sense of an occupation (trade, job, calling, task), produces a pun in Spanish. However, the English use of "office"[1] in the latter sense is antiquated; it sounds odd to our ear, whereas in Spanish it is quite current. Yet without the repetition of the word "office," the subversive humor that undermines ecclesiastical authority would be lost. For this reason, I discarded options such as "worldly service" or "worldly vocations," which do carry a polyvalence similar to that of *oficio* but, again, fail to articulate the fundamental opposition to the Divine Office, whose specificity I felt it important to maintain.

The word "office," then, was both necessary and problematic. My solution was to use it in the title as well as the first time the phrase *oficio terrestre* is mentioned in the body of the text, where it is spoken by the bishop and appears in direct contrast to "Divine Office": "every honorable man must learn his worldly office [. . .] in order to support himself and earn his daily bread, just as we ourselves earn ours, Father Fagan and I, by celebrating the Divine Office [. . .]." Once the relationship between the two "offices" has been established, it becomes possible to vary the translation so as to avoid the archaism while still preserving its echo. When *oficio* appears later in the text, with the modifier *terrestre*, I have translated it as "worldly task": "His last worldly task had been to wait on the teachers' table [. . .]." *Oficio* occurs once more, unmodified: "Collins [. . .] reflected on how his task would be hampered [. . .]." The word "office" can again be inferred here through a chain of signification.

I opted to translate *terrestres* as "worldly" (as opposed to terrestrial, earthly, secular, mundane, mortal) when it was paired with *oficios*, inasmuch as "worldly" expresses not only an opposition to the divine, but also experience and sophistication, thus further underscoring the irony: It is the clergy, whose domain is the divine, who enjoy the worldly pleasures that are ordinarily denied the boys. The etymologically related word *tierra* (earth, ground, land, dirt) appears with some frequency in the story, and when *terrestres* occurs with *tierra*, I translate it as "earthly": "They stepped on the first buried bottles and cans, yellow papers, and tokens of earthly food returned to the earth [. . .]."

As part of the ruling oligarchy, the Church exercises a paternalistic power over the boys, who are referred to en masse as *el pueblo, los trabajadores*, or *los obreros*. While the latter terms are easily translatable as "the workers," *el pueblo* is more difficult to render in English. In the context of Walsh's text, *el pueblo* has political resonance; it signifies "the people" as a class, in relation to institutionalized power.[2] While "the people" can be used this way in English, it much more commonly indicates "persons" or "human beings."[3] Although the English word "masses" is somewhat more restricted in its usage, it approaches this sense of *pueblo* more than the nonspecific "people" and signals the political subtext of the story.

There are other examples of language alluding to political struggle and class conflict in the text. After the meal, there is "a spontaneous outpouring from the masses, rising up in a sudden wave [. . .], our voices in concert roaring like thunder like wind like breaking waves in open acknowledgement of the satisfaction and justice we felt in our bellies." In anticipation of the hunger they would face once the holiday was over, "the masses launched a wholesale assault on the remains of the roast," stuffing the scraps into their pockets. And their mood is dampened as the day draws to a close, "because we knew [. . .] that our beloved Ladies would depart before nightfall, leaving us [. . .] under the iron rule and the iron fist."

Ecclesiastical language is often used ironically in the story to satirize the oppressive authority of the Church. In the opening sentence, "after Mass and the squalid morning ritual of lukewarm coffee with milk in a tin cup that kept the masses alive," the "squalid ritual" that feeds them immediately follows a reference to the sacred ritual of Mass. The translation of *pueblo* as "masses" further highlights the contrast between these two rituals. In contrast to their meager breakfast, the boys perceive the feast as a "miracle" during which they "transfigured the memory of hunger"—language that calls to mind the miracle of the Transfiguration of Jesus. And in bed that night, as the boys think about a beautiful young woman and engage in "passionate rites of secret adoration," their digestive gasses produce "an invincible spiritual cloud."

A particularly challenging pun involves the phrase *a cada muerte de obispo*, an idiomatic expression whose literal meaning ("at every death of a bishop") corresponds to the English expression "once in a blue moon," the death of a bishop being a rare event. The context refers to Bishop Usher, who the narrator hopes is still alive and well and "hasn't unwillingly succumbed to one of those rare calamities" that occur *a cada muerte de obispo*. Although "once in a blue moon" provides a semantic solution, it eliminates the pun that pokes fun at the clergy and obscures a cultural context permeated by religion. A literal translation, on the other hand, would be confusing and awkward. Attempting to accommodate both "spirit and letter" in English led me to translate the phrase as "when a bishop goes the way of all flesh," which both preserves the comic reference to the Church and also signals the use of idiom in the original text.

Although patterns of sentence formation in Spanish are generally more elastic than in English, Walsh's tortuous syntax pushes the boundaries of what is grammatical in English. There are long, meandering sentences that sometimes comprise an entire paragraph and may contain shifting time markers. These elaborately complex sentences are sometimes interspersed with sentence fragments. On occasion, the third-person narrative subsumes the voice of a character; at other times, lines of dialogue are interrupted by narrative commentary. I have endeavored to stretch English syntax in the translation as much as possible, with minimal intervention, while also attending closely to the rhythm that drives the text.

Walsh also employs the devices of repetition and parallelism freely in "Worldly Offices." The reiteration of certain words and phrases, or words with similar derivation, such as *indiferente* ("indifferent") and *indiferenciados* ("undifferentiated") creates a bleak, suffocating mood that evokes desolation, apathy, anonymity, and oblivion. The word *gris* (gray) and its synonyms appear with particular insistence. The early-morning light is "soot-gray"; the schoolboys are "undifferentiated and gray" and later "orphaned and gray, superfluous and promiscuous." Dashwood resembles "a gray ball with blond hair," and near the end of the story, a gray spider "ascended into nothingness on an invisible thread." This repetition becomes claustrophobic at times, as the

object of description becomes virtually indistinguishable from its surroundings: the shouts of a group of boys are "muffled and opaque in the opaque air"; The Cat is "indifferent and gray in the indifferent gray morning"; a priest contemplates "the austere beauty of gray stone raised upon gray stone, indistinguishable, in the end, from the pewter sky."

Similarly, it is not unusual for nouns to be modified with a string of descriptors. This accumulation contributes to the density of the text and has various effects. It may emphasize or intensify a description, such as the "tall, stark, dismal building" or "bare, thin, and dejected poplar trees." The juxtaposition of adjectives may reveal dissonance, as in the humorous characterization of Bishop Usher as "a saintly, corpulent, purple man." A particularly interesting translation problem involving both multiple descriptors and the repetition of words with similar derivation occurs in the final image of The Cat: *el Gato, el sobreviviente, el indeseado, refractario, indeseante [. . .]* ("The Cat, the survivor, the unwanted, refractory, unwanting [. . .]").While *indeseado* can be translated as "unwanted" or "undesired," *indeseante* is a neologism. The suffix *-ante* in Spanish is used to indicate one who carries out the action indicated in the root of the word—in this case, "one who does not want/desire." I chose to translate *indeseante* as "unwanting," rather than "undesiring," because it carries the sense of "wanting nothing" (having no desires), as well as "wanting *for* nothing" (having everything he needed). Although *indeseante* would only appear to correspond to the former, both senses of "unwanting" are consistent with the character, and it seemed not only justified but felicitous to embrace this nuance.

Because Walsh employs coded references that he does not elaborate upon, I have generally avoided clarification and expansion in this translation.[4] For example, the following sentence contains a reference to a cultural artifact likely to be unfamiliar to an English-speaking readership: "[Dashwood] walked in a kind of vigorous trance, watching blotches of mist rise and dissipate around his *Patria* boots, feeling the soft, wet, whispering grass that sank beneath his soles and slowly recovered its trampled form, loving it, desiring it, and fighting for it even under the weight of sudden catastrophe, as he himself was able to do, as he was doing." "*Patria* boots" refers to a particular brand of footwear commonly worn by infantry soldiers. Although I would not expect the reader of the translation to know this, the Latin *patria* is recognizable as homeland/fatherland, and I felt it unnecessary to replace it with an adjective such as "infantry" or "army" to clarify the military allusion; the small boy's recognition of his capacity for resistance is apparent, and the specificity of the cultural allusion remains intact.

I did, however, elaborate on the reference to the San Lorenzo March. This is a military march that commemorates the Battle of San Lorenzo in the Argentine War of Independence. Although its opening lyrics do not appear in the original text, I added them to allow the reader to capture the ironic contrast between the preparations for the heroic victory behind the walls of "the historic convent" to the mundanities of life behind the walls of "the historic boarding school" that appear in the subsequent paragraph.

Beyond the critical, analytical, and stylistic concerns discussed, I find translation to be a profoundly sensory experience. It takes many readings and rereadings to *hear* the voices in the text, long periods of meditative focus to conjure palpable visual images, hours of immersion in the language to *feel* its texture. It is also a highly dialogical process—between the translation in progress and the original text, between languages, cultures, and sensibilities, between the mode of translation and the theoretical paradigms that inform it. An *oficio,* to be sure, both *terrestre* and *divino.*

WORLDLY OFFICES

Rodolfo Walsh[5]

In the first soot-gray light of the month of June, after Mass and the squalid morning ritual of lukewarm coffee with milk in a tin cup that kept the masses alive, the rubbish bin rose so tall, powerful, and overflowing in the woodshed, behind the kitchen and opposite the fields, that Little Dashwood began to jump about, kicking the floor and even the wooden planks of the bin in a torrent of rage, crying "I shit on my mother," which in the end only multiplied his pain, fury, and shame, because he loved his mother above all else and longed for her every single night as he lay between the frigid sheets listening to distant trains going back to his home and splitting him in two, a caressing hand and a tearful, disenchanted body.

But The Cat merely tilted his mouth to one side, lit a cigarette, and leaned his long frame against the wall, watching him with an ambiguous smile that slid over Little Dashwood like a brush painting him yellow with mockery and scorn and long-deferred revenge.

It was the day after Corpus Christi, in the year 1939, when, as everyone knows, the sun began its ascent at 6:59 and rose without impediment or interruption, but they didn't see it, nor did they care or even find it credible, because that sickly light lay scattered over the fields in milky shreds or floating amid the trees in a mist of specters and penitents.

On brighter dawns, a horizon of black, agile, and vociferous Basque milkmen behind great cows and their shivering offspring, would be silhouetted against the sky at the far end of the land that the charitable Ladies of Saint Joseph's Society could never resign themselves to selling—though each year brought them a more favorable offer—because at its heart rose the tall, stark edifice that they themselves had built in the teens as a boarding school for the descendents of Irish immigrants.

The charitable society loved us, albeit somewhat abstractly, but that's because there were so many of us, undifferentiated and gray, our parents anonymous and dispersed, and, in short, because it was they who footed our bill. But love us they did, and so the Ladies came in person to celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi with us, bringing along none other than Bishop Usher, a saintly, corpulent, purple man, and let's hope he still is, and hasn't unwillingly succumbed to one of those rare calamities when a bishop goes the way of all flesh.

Bishop Usher celebrated the Divine Office, after which we enjoyed a day with the Ladies, who displayed an almost personal affection for us, scattering throughout the building like a flock of chirpy, jabbering parrots, wanting to see everything at once, tenderly stroking the reddest or blondest head, and asking strange questions like who built the palace of Emania in what century and what fate befell Brian Boru for praying with his back to the battlefield. A curious incident that inspired Mullahy, who knew the rules of poetics, to come up with that colorful couplet:

Oh Brian Boru,
I shit on you!

But these were questions that only Father Ham could answer, and he didn't, his face growing redder and redder and his eyes piercing through his mask of smiling assurance, shooting us a dark promise of the justice that would ensue as soon as the Ladies ceased to be such delightfully silly busybodies, in other words tomorrow, my dear boys. Those devout ladies, however, did not think ill of our ignorance, but saw it as inherent to our tender age, and therefore excusable. And as

soon as Father Ham re-established his authority by demonstrating that one of us was able to add fractions on the blackboard, they remembered that it was a holy day, and declaring themselves completely satisfied with our education, proposed the suspension of class, to which Father Ham immediately agreed, though still looking daggers at us: that menacing glint of displeasure in his eyes. So out we went, dressed in our Sunday blue, to the large stone courtyard whose walls soared high into the sky, and we played *ainenti* and marbles under the doting gaze of the Ladies until it was time for lunch and we filed into the dining hall where we gave thanks to the Lord for these Thy gifts and took our seats at the marble tables.

It was there that the miracle occurred.

The first to enter, leading the crew of six that waited the tables, was Dolan, who carried a platter of roast so enormous he could barely hold it up, and the others followed behind him with more platters of roast and mountains of bean salad, and soon Dolan, high priest of hecatombs, returned even more heavily laden than before, his arms open even wider as if rendering a paean of victory.

We rubbed our eyes. There was enough food to keep us alive for a week, in accordance with conventional standards. So we began to eat and eat and eat, and even the face of the prefect we called The Walrus betrayed a glimmer of secret merriment as he watched us sink our teeth into the meat as it dripped its warm, golden grease over our every ecstatic smile. We transfigured the memory of hunger, kissed the earth in the tender flour of each white crescent, each transparent leaf of lettuce, each fiber reminiscent of blood. And then, row upon row of bottled lemonade was set out on the tables, and this was so extraordinary that not even the fearsome presence of The Walrus could deter a spontaneous outpouring from the masses, rising up in a sudden wave from the white tables, cheering for the beloved Ladies, and up went our arms, and down, and up again cheering for the beloved Society, and down again, and up, cheering even for The Walrus himself, our voices in concert roaring like thunder like wind like breaking waves in open acknowledgement of the satisfaction and justice we felt in our bellies. And The Walrus swallowed and opened his mouth as if he were about to say something, revealing the two enormous teeth that were to blame for his unfortunate moniker, poor Walrus, elusive prey of contradiction, suffering indignity in the midst of acclaim.

At that moment, fortunately for us all, the great purple form of Bishop Usher filled the door, followed by the gnarled, skeletal, unbelievably tall form of Father Fagan, the rector, who we nicknamed Thatched Roof because he parted his albino hair so that it fell symmetrically to the sides of his long horse-face. And when we took our seats again and silence reigned, the bishop stepped forward, crossing his bejeweled and manicured hands over his vast belly,

"Well, boys," he said, "I'm glad to see that you have such capacious stomachs, and I only hope there will be no need to resort to the English salts we keep in the infirmary,"

setting off a tremendous explosion of laughter

"which would be in bad taste,"

redoubled in waves of raucous camaraderie, spasms of pure physical joy that brought tears to the eyes of the most enthused.

"not to mention its dubious patriotism."

And now the masses rose again as one, in a common impulse of love and unity, cheering our beloved Bishop Usher for all eternity, as he slowly raised his plump bejeweled hand asking us all to take our seats, and slowly composing the features of his face as if it were a garment whose every fold must be in place, which was now the place of order and could we settle down, please,

"I am delighted," he said, "to see the magnificent tidiness, cleanliness, and great diligence that prevail in this school. Your rector tells me that everything here is the product of your own labors, that you clean and wash and dry and polish and sweep and brush your shoes and make your beds and serve the meals. That is as it should be, because none of us was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, and every honorable man must learn his worldly office, and the sooner the better, in order to support himself and earn his daily bread, just as we ourselves earn ours, Father Fagan and I, by celebrating the Divine Office and watching over your bodies and your good souls. If you continue to work and study as you do, and never forsake your obligations of respect and devotion to Our Lord, you will become good citizens and worthy sons of your race, your country, and your Church."

Having said this he veered with the majesty of an ancient galleon catching the wind in its sails, but even before the echo of the last applause died out, the masses launched a wholesale assault on the remains of the roast, wrapping the scraps in handkerchiefs or pieces of paper and even slipping them directly into their threadbare pockets, ruining more than one Sunday outfit—an assessment or prediction of the scarcity we would face in the days to come—until The Walrus subdued the most obstreperous of us with a couple of smacks. But even this episode was forgotten when Dolan's minions entered with baskets of oranges and sweetly scented yellow bananas delicately tinged with violet.

In the afternoon, after the obligatory rest imposed by the feast, there was a soccer game in which both teams battled fiercely to engrave themselves permanently on the Ladies' hearts; Gunning, in particular, thirty years later still figures prominently in the realms of ancient memory, silhouetted in the golden light of a bygone sun, making that once-in-a-lifetime bicycle kick that gave his team a howling good win: his legs in the air, his head almost touching the ground, his left cleat firing that incredible backward shot that whistled through the opponent's goalposts.

But even as this glorious holiday progressed, the air was tinged with sadness, because we knew that time was growing short and that our beloved Ladies would depart before nightfall, leaving us once again orphaned and gray, superfluous and promiscuous, under the iron rule and the iron fist. And that's just what happened; through the windows of our studies and dormitories we watched them leave, hopping on the grass like brightly colored birds, waving their hands and blowing kisses among the dark araucaria trees in the park. Wonderful Ladies! One of them, perhaps, was young and beautiful, and her solitary image presided over passionate rites of secret adoration in the shadows of our bedclothes that night, and so she was loved without her knowledge, like so many women, so many men. That effluvium of love that rose from our restless beds filled the huge dormitory, along with—there's no denying it—the acrid smell that evoked the mountains of beans and their obscure transformations, driving Prefect O'Durnin so mad that he got out of bed tangled in sheets and began to roar, run, and kick, pulling those presumed guilty out of their self-absorption, or perhaps from sleep, and battling, so to speak, an invincible spiritual cloud.

The last ones to fall asleep heard the approaching rain advancing over the woods, detected perhaps the odor of wet earth, watched the windows flash with lightning and raindrops. But the bulk of the masses were already at rest, barricaded against the impending dawn.

And now The Cat, leaning against the wall of the woodshed, stood smoking with a disdainful smirk, while Little Dashwood jumped about cursing the rubbish bin, which he was going to have to carry for the first time and which had never before been so full, bursting with the remains of the holiday meal: bones stripped clean and hoary beans, dense chunks of semolina that had gone untouched at dinner, dangling orange rinds and banana peels, and, topping it all off like a taunt, a soccer cleat with a broken sole, its tongue flanked by iron teeth. Dashwood weighed all this in

his mind against the anxious certainty that they would never, ever be able to carry the enormous load to the garbage dump that was a good five hundred yards away, beyond the soggy fields, the paths, and the distant row of cypress trees. But then The Cat flicked his cigarette on the ground, crushed it with his foot, and looked at Dashwood with his yellow eyes, narrowed in ambush,

"Let's go, kid," he said, taking the left side of the bin and gripping the hard leather handle in his right hand.

Dashwood was fat. His last worldly task had been to serve the teachers' table for a month, a well-stocked table unlike the others, where he managed—at the expense of missing soccer after lunch and recess after dinner—to devour monumental stews, taste exotic sauces, and even get himself half-drunk with long and furtive gulps of wine, not to mention the bread smeared with butter and sugar that he tucked away in his pockets, and which sometimes, when he'd stuffed himself full, he would trade for marbles or crayons. And so, his limpid green eyes came close to disappearing into his beautiful swollen face, and the three pullovers he wore under his overall ultimately gave him the appearance of a gray ball with blond hair. The Cat, however, was still as thin, tall, and elusive as the day he arrived at the School, though he was somewhat healthier, more astute and self-assured, as if he had discovered the fundamental rules that governed people's lives and learned how to extract a dark satisfaction from them.

The Cat pulled up on his handle and Dashwood on his, and as the bin was slowly hoisted the boy could feel—in every bone and tissue and even in the fleeting memory of past trials—how truly heavy it was, how it pulled downward with the weight of the earth or of sin, of whatever was out to degrade or humiliate him.

He bit his lip and said nothing, and they went out into the field and the morning with the bin askew, one end scraping the ground because The Cat was five inches taller and still growing while Dashwood was bent over, sidling like a crab until the other boy said:

"Hey, pull it up!"

giving his handle a violent, malevolent shake that dumped a chunk of semolina on the small boy's boot, as he cried back:

"Cut it out, dickhead,"

and The Cat smiled again, displaying his discolored teeth, a repulsive smile on a face sown with guile. And now Dashwood felt the slow shredding, as of a tattered cloth, of the skin on his chilblained fingers, which neither the warm water in the infirmary nor the tangerine oil used in secret rituals of fellowship had been able to heal. He didn't want to look at his hand, for fear of seeing the yellowish fluid—tinged, perhaps, with blood—that would be oozing from his skin.

They went past the water tank on the left and the paddleball court on the right, and came to the first dirt path, where Dashwood took the opportunity to lay down his burden and examine his aching hand, but all he could see was a small, red cut, dry as mica, between his knuckles. It occurred to him that they might trade places, but when he compared the thirty yards they had crossed with the foggy expanse that separated them from their goal, he abandoned the idea. The Cat looked at him as if he were a pile of shit.

"Are we waiting for someone?" he asked.

Dashwood said no, shrugging his shoulders as they picked up their load and resumed their march, advancing into the barren hurling field next to the vegetable garden where another group of boys were digging and planting potatoes, their hands black with mud and their faces purple with cold, but laughing and joking nonetheless, their shouts muffled and opaque in the opaque air. And when they got closer, they saw Mulligan, who seemed to be waiting for them, arms akimbo, an indecipherable expression on his pockmarked face, while the rest of the group leaned on their

shovels with a growing sense of ironic anticipation of the brink or the imperative of a renewed confrontation between the old order—Mulligan—and the repulsive interloper they called The Cat, punished but indomitable since his memorable arrival at the School.

"Hey, *Gato*," said Mulligan. "Hey."

The Cat kept on walking, carrying his side of the bin with ease, with barely a sidelong glance, or pursing of the lips, or both, a covert tension in his long frame.

"I got something for you," said Mulligan, buoyed now by the secret glee of the others, by their stifled laughter. "Hey, *Gato*."

And suddenly there was a big, grimy potato in his hand, which was suddenly parting the air and heading towards The Cat, who merely stepped aside with a movement so effortless and natural and brief or simple that he barely seemed to move at all as the potato whizzed by him and smashed to pieces in Dashwood's face:

Who was now cursing with all his might, and grabbing the soccer cleat he ran after Mulligan hopeless of ever catching up while they all laughed and jeered and Mulligan put his hands on his ears imitating a frightened hare, until he finally tired of it and confronting him squarely, hefty and powerful, said:

"All right. Take your best shot."

Dashwood flung the cleat with a futile and weary gesture, missing his easy target by more than two yards, and so there was nothing left for him to do but return, panting and grumbling, to the rubbish bin where The Cat had neither moved nor laughed, nor spoken a word, indifferent and gray in the indifferent gray morning.

And now, as he walked, the boy felt an endless wellspring of pity welling up inside him like a warm bath, healing each and every pain and secret wound inscribed in time as far back as he could remember, and somehow equalizing them all, the chilblains on his hands and the death of his father, and every thing he had lost and every insult and every goodbye commingling in the future with the utter desolation and sadness of his own death, which would be the saddest thing of all, at least for him. And from the corner of his eye The Cat saw that the boy was weeping softly, or maybe the tears were simply sliding down his face and mixing with the snot from his nose and the glistening breath from his mouth: it was a pitiful sight, that beautiful face swollen and dirty and the lump on his forehead growing bigger and bluer. But The Cat said nothing because deep in his heart he preserved the memory of that night when the boys had hounded him almost to death, and Little Dashwood was one of them. In due course they would all go down in defeat, even Mulligan, who was beginning to fear him despite his show of bravado.

This thought raised The Cat's spirits so much that in a sudden outburst of military exultation and anticipation of the future, he began to whistle the San Lorenzo march:

Phoebus rises, and his rays
illumine the historic convent;
behind the walls, dull sounds
of steeds and swords are heard.

Behind the walls of the historic boarding school, Scally and Ross had found the only space that would hold fifty headboards in a straight line, Murtagh was grinning like a monkey at his own resplendent reflection, which grinned back at him from the depths of a shiny copper coin he'd polished to the point of delirium, and Collins was applying a rubber plunger to a reluctant

latrine, as he reflected on how his task would be hampered for days to come thanks to the grim aftermath of the feast.

The effort of bearing the load and of keeping up the pace had reasserted itself over Dashwood's metaphysical sadness with the force of the unsubmergible present. He tried time and again to change the position of his hand around the leather handle, so as not to feel it cutting like a wire through his skin and his flesh, all the way to the bone. When that intolerable thought struck him, he stopped, let go of the bin for a moment and looked at his hand: his palm was not cut, but his knuckles bled a pathetic, watery substance that wasn't even real blood, but rather something sickly, spectral. That's when he made a formal proposal to switch sides, but The Cat shook his head.

"But I can't!"

"Suck it up," replied The Cat stoically.

And so Dashwood took a handkerchief from his pocket and, wrapping it around his hand, hoisted the bin again, feeling that if he took another step he would no longer be able to resist the lacerating pain in his shoulder, the stretching of the very bones of his arm. But he withstood. Tears and snot had dried on his face, coarsening his skin. He walked in a kind of vigorous trance, watching blotches of mist rise and dissipate around his *Patria* boots, feeling the soft, wet, whispering grass that sank beneath his soles and slowly recovered its trampled form, loving it, desiring it, and fighting for it even under the weight of sudden catastrophe, as he himself was able to do, as he was doing.

On his right, bare, thin, and dejected poplar trees filed past, and Dashwood saw them go by from the corner of his eye, but he was still looking down at the ground, the sprinkled stars of nettles, the incongruous little blooms of wood sorrel, the spirals of cow dung, and the ant trails, meticulous and neat in the frost-decimated grass. The air turned sweet as they crossed a patch of peppermint, and suddenly it was summer in his memory, he was bathing naked in the river with the boys of summer, his mother's voice calling him sweetly in the dusk:

"Horaaacio!"

"I'm coming," he said.

"What?" grunted The Cat.

In the courtyard young Mullins, armed with a long iron poker, jabbed at the last scrap of paper in the last puddle on the flagstones that now shone smooth and polished and ready to receive the workers who'd finished their daily chores. Father Keven strolled through the cloister, contemplating the edifice, enjoying its clarity and the clarity of his mind at that early hour, his ulcer calm after a night's rest, reflecting on the austere beauty of gray stone raised upon gray stone, indistinguishable, in the end, from the pewter sky. Then he heard Prefect Kielty ring the first bells, and the noble workers, who'd been quite fast but also quite efficient, emptied out into the courtyard to recreate the rituals of wager and dare, of arrogance and inimical friendship, of preposterous talk and miraculous prestidigitation: brilliant discoveries of the individual spirit, ancient sediment in the ancient heart of the people. In fifteen minutes, classes would begin.

The boys arrived at the second dirt path; they'd made it halfway to the dump, which looked like a mud-colored tongue when they caught sight of it behind the cypress tress, and now even The Cat seemed to feel the strain because he set down the bin and assumed a posture of deliberation. Some fifteen yards to the left, another path ran perpendicular. And opposite them, a stubbled cornfield that they could cross in a straight line.

"This way," decreed The Cat, pointing to the field.

The boy immediately understood how senseless it would be to walk through the cornfield, whose dry stalks rose hard, glassy, and yellow from their earthen burial mounds between the sodden furrows, but The Cat seemed so sure of himself, so focused, the gaze of his eyes soaring almost like a hawk, extending a bridge between them and their goal behind the cypress trees, that he had neither the courage nor the strength to object and could only do so indirectly, by pushing gently to the left with his first step, in the vain hope that they would eventually reach the path. But The Cat understood his intent, and thwarted it with a single meaningful push to the opposite side.

Stalks and husks crackled under their feet, the earth spat out spurts of mud, and one or two stray leaves whipped against Dashwood's shins. He stumbled once, then again, and after a while his staggering became so regular that it seemed to be his normal way of moving, until he fell on his head in a ditch, and when he stood up blind with mud and fury, he simply threw himself on The Cat and began pummeling him, never managing to strike high enough to reach his hateful face, to break through the wall of his arms, or to touch any part of him that wouldn't return the blow with three times the force, until he went slipping and sliding like a puppy being kicked by a mule. When they resumed their march, however, The Cat took the right side of the bin and they headed obliquely for the dirt path.

The fifteen minutes of recess were over. Elusive, laborious wisdom awaited the hundred and thirty Irish boys at their wooden desks. Prefect Kielty, who was secretly rumored to be slowly losing his mind, saw the teachers standing in the archways of the cloisters, in front of their classrooms. His red hair glittered and his red moustache glittered, and an unabating fire blazed furiously in his brain. But his only Mission, at that hour, was to ring the bell for the second and last time.

The boys ran to take their places in line. The Cat was absent from the sixth grade, and Dashwood from the fourth, though this was yet to be discovered. Dashwood thought he heard the distant ringing wafting through the cloying air, speaking to him in that serene human voice known to him alone, and once again he replied:

"I'm coming,"

which was the last straw for The Cat, who now said:

"Cut it out, will you,"

but The Cat was no longer of any concern to Little Dashwood.

On the last panel of the wire fence was a huge spider web covered with hundreds of beads of dew, each glistening droplet holding within it the woods, the countryside, the world. The Cat kicked it in the center, a brief shower of water fell on the grass, and the gray spider ascended into nothingness on an invisible thread. They passed between two cypress trees: the dump was in sight, its indifferent scum, its placid ignominy. They stepped on the first buried bottles and cans, yellowed papers, and tokens of earthly food returned to the earth, and as they emptied the bin—oblique, powerful, and full—something emptied out in their hearts as well, a barely perceptible influence, a dull gurgling drip.

And when it was done, Little Dashwood didn't even bother looking at The Cat but instead began moving away from him and the dump and the school. He walked unhurriedly among the belated apparitions of the mist that a sudden wind dispersed around him, leaving behind the impassive cows, toward a strip of sky turning blue in the distance. He didn't know where he was, he couldn't determine the cardinal points, there was no road in sight, but he knew that he was leaving for good.

The Cat lit a cigarette, put his hands in his pockets, and from atop the trash heap watched the small boy grow even smaller with each step.

"Hey," he said.

Dashwood didn't look back, and The Cat took a few more drags as an ugly, weathered grimace took shape on his face.

"Hey, moron!"

But Little Dashwood was babbling a song he'd never been taught and was walking toward his mother.

The Cat took off after him, caught up in a few seconds, and grabbed him by the arm, forcing him to turn around.

The runaway looked at him without fear.

"Leave me alone," he said.

Then The Cat did something he didn't want to do. He reached into his pocket, took out a handkerchief, and began to untie the knot that held his entire fortune: three twenty-cent coins. And as he loosened the knot, he felt something coming loose inside of him that he didn't understand, something that was perhaps turbid, perhaps dirty. He kept one of the coins for himself, and gave the other two to the boy, who took them and continued on his way without a word.

And then The Cat, the survivor, the unwanted, refractory, unwanting, returned to the empty bin, picked it up, put it on his shoulder, and started back, composing the expression on his face to conform to the visage of the tall, stark, dismal building looming before him.

—Translated by Cindy Schuster

Notes

[1]The primary English definition of "office" as workplace or place of business is expressed in Spanish not with *oficio*, but *oficina*.

[2]*Pueblo* can also mean "small town" or "nation."

[3]This sense of "the people" would be expressed with *la gente* in Spanish.

[4]Berman characterizes expansion as "an *unfolding* of what, in the original, is 'folded.'" "Explicitations," he adds, "may render a text more 'clear,' but they actually obscure *its own mode of clarity*" (290).

[5]For reasons of length, the original text in Spanish, "*Los oficios terrestres*," has not been included here. It is available in Walsh, "Los oficios terrestres"; Walsh, *Un kilo de oro* 53–68; and Walsh, *Rodolfo Walsh, cuentos completos* 407–18.

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