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English Translation of Selection from Ojos Negros ('Black Eyes') by Eduardo Sguiglia

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English Translation of Selection from Ojos Negros ('Black Eyes') by Eduardo Sguiglia

Abstract

This is an English translation of a pivotal segment of Eduardo Sguiglia's novel, *Ojos negros* ('Black Eyes').

Keywords

Ojos negros, Eduardo Sguiglia, literary translation, animal studies, environmental injustice, testimonial novel

from *Ojos negros* by Eduardo Sguiglia
(Buenos Aires: Siruela, 2012. 102-105.)

...Uno o dos días después Francisca me despertó muy temprano. Entró a mi habitación, me zamarreó con fuerza y me dijo que fuera rápido hacia el río. Se oían pasos y voces alrededor de la casa. Francisca se inclinó hacia mí. Estaba muy excitada. Vaya, salga ahora mismo, me dijo y se fue corriendo. No tardé más que unos minutos en salir. En el campamento había un gran alboroto. Las mujeres y los niños iban y venían de la barranca a la carrera y a gritos. Los niños se pasaban la voz, hacían gestos, reían, avanzaban en grupos de cuatro o cinco, para luego atropellarse en su afán por sacarse ventajas. Las mujeres, más lentas, estaban a medio vestir, otras envueltas en toallas de baño, con el pelo mojado y la cabeza cubierta de ruleros. Algunos niños empuñaban ramas que hacían sonar en el aire. Dos o tres se tropezaron conmigo, se levantaron en el acto y siguieron corriendo. Su entusiasmo era contagioso.

Cuando llegué a la barranca me abrí paso como pude. Entonces distinguí a los elefantes. Eran dos: uno enorme y otro más chico que podía ser su cría. Estaban parados en la orilla, con las patas hundidas en el barro. Alargaban las trompas, las sumergían en el agua y se bañaban tranquilos. Los mineros se habían amontonado al pie de la barranca. Las motobombas

from ‘Black Eyes,’ translated by Erin Finzer

...One or two days later, Francisca woke me up very early. She came into my room, shook me hard, and told me to hurry over to the river. You could hear footsteps and voices around the house. Francisca leaned towards me. She was really worked up. Go, leave right now, she told me, and she ran out. It didn't take me but a few minutes to leave. In the encampment, there was a big uproar. The women and children were shouting and going back and forth from the ravine to the road. The children were calling out to one another, making gestures and laughing, rushing forward in groups of four or five and then tripping over each other in their eagerness to get ahead. The women were slower, some only half-dressed, others wrapped in bath towels with their hair wet and their heads covered in rollers. Some children gripped branches, shaking them like noisemakers in the air. Two or three kids tripped over me, got right up, kept on running. Their enthusiasm was contagious.

When I arrived at the ravine I pushed my way through as close as I could. Then I spotted the elephants. There were two: one was huge, and the other one small enough that it could have been its calf. They stood on the shore with their feet buried in the mud. They stretched out their trunks before dunking them in the water, bathing

seguían funcionando aunque los picos, las palas y el resto de las herramientas habían sido abandonadas al voleo. Del otro lado, el soba, Luisinho y los guardias formaban un grupo compacto en la ladera, a mitad de camino entre la orilla y el punto más alto del terreno. Los guardias tenían los fusiles listos para disparar pero se mostraban indecisos. Más bien se cubrían los unos a los otros. A mi lado las mujeres y los niños daban saltitos o se abrazaban, sin dejar de gritar o de reír. Permanecí quieto unos segundos. Después me deslicé hacia el río.

Los mineros estaban callados, boquiabiertos, con la vista fija en los elefantes. Ninguno se atrevía a moverse del lugar. Algunos pocos se codearon para señalar los movimientos de la cría. Los elefantes eran amos y señores. En un momento el adulto movió su gran cabeza de golpe. Pareció enfurecerse. Levantó la trompa, gruñó y avanzó unos pasos, internándose en el río. Se veía enorme a la luz de la mañana. Todos retrocedimos trepando la cuesta. Pero el elefante detuvo la marcha, se afirmó sobre sus patas y salió caminando hacia el este. Las cabezas de los mineros se movieron como una para mirar al elefante que marchaba a paso majestuoso. Anduvo acompasado, hundiendo sus patas en el agua y en los hoyos de la mina. El más chico también movió la cabeza aunque tardó en arrancar. Fue tras el grande al trotecito. Los dos llegaron hasta el fondo de la mina, luego salieron del

peacefully. The miners had crowded together at the base of the ravine. The motor pumps kept running, but the picks, the shovels, and the rest of the tools had been instantly abandoned. On the other side of the ravine, the *soba*, Luisinho, and the guards formed a tight group on the slope, halfway between the shore and the highest point of terrain.¹ The guards had their rifles ready to fire but they appeared uncertain. It was more like they were covering each other. To my side the women and children jumped up and down or hugged, shouting and laughing all the while. I stayed quiet for a few seconds. Then I slid down towards the river.

The miners were silent, their mouths agape and their eyes fixed on the elephants. No one dared move from the spot. A few elbowed each other as they pointed out the movements of the calf. The elephants were lords and masters. At one point the big one abruptly shook its great head, as if it had suddenly become angry. It lifted its trunk, grunted, and took a few steps forward, wading into the river. It looked enormous in the morning light. All of us scrambled backwards up the hill. But the elephant stopped its advance, secured its footing, and then walked away towards the east. The miners' heads moved as one as they watched the elephant's majestic pace. It walked rhythmically, burying its feet in the water and in the holes of the mine. The smaller one also moved its head,

agua y al cabo de un momento regresaron en línea recta por la orilla de enfrente. Uno tras otro. Rápido. Sacudiendo la arena. ¡Miren!, gritó una voz.

El soba, que se había parado a la vanguardia de su grupo, para hacerles señas y gestos, retrocedió algunos pasos. Detrás de él, Luisinho, que portaba un fusil, se hizo a un lado. Continuaba sonriendo con una mueca fría y cínica en los labios. Pero unos instantes después, a medida que los elefantes se aproximaban, el soba dio un giro en el aire, soltó su paraguas y comenzó a correr con increíble agilidad tras los guardias y el propio Luisinho. Llevaba un pantalón blanco, remendado, que al caérsele dejó sus piernas y su sexo al desnudo. Tropezó, se levantó, corrió hasta unas rocas con el pantalón en las rodillas, y después, sin detenerse, desapareció como una sombra a la vuelta de una esquina. Sus quejas fueron ahogadas por el lío que armaron los niños y sus madres. Los elefantes anduvieron un trecho a todo vértigo. Luego, de un tirón, escalaron la cuesta para perderse serpenteando entre los matorrales. La carrera provocó murmullos y algunas risitas nerviosas entre los mineros, que demoraron en rastrear las pisadas de los elefantes. Las pisadas eran profundas y estaban firmemente marcadas. Los mineros las observaron como si ocultaran algún portento secreto. Los niños y las mujeres que habían seguido los acontecimientos desde la barranca también bajaron al

although he was slow to get started. He followed the big one at a little trot. The two arrived at the base of the mine, got out of the water and, after a moment, walked back in a straight line on the opposite shore. One behind the other. Fast. Shaking the sand. Look!, shouted a voice.

The *soba*, who had stopped at the front of his group to gesture something at them, took a few steps back. Behind him, Luisinho, carrying a rifle, stepped to one side. He kept smiling with a cold, cynical sneer on his lips. But a few moments later, just as the elephants were coming closer, the *soba* spun around in the air, opened up his umbrella and with incredible agility began to run at the guards and Luisinho. He was wearing mended white pants that fell down on him, exposing his legs and his sex. He tripped, got up, and ran towards some rocks with his pants at his knees until he suddenly disappeared like a shadow at the turn of a corner. His yells were drowned out by the scuffle of the children and their mothers. The elephants covered a stretch of land at full speed. Then, all at once, they climbed the hill and disappeared from sight as they wove their way through the brush. Their path provoked murmurs and nervous laughter among the miners, who followed the trail of the elephants' footsteps at a distance. The footprints were deep and firmly marked. The miners studied them as if they held some secret, hidden omen. The women and children who had

río. Algunos padres tomaron a sus niños de la mano para recorrer juntos la mina. De pronto un verdadero gentío comenzó a moverse apiñado, lentamente, por aquí y por allí. La mina quedó completamente revuelta...

Entonces aproveché las circunstancias. Caminé despacio por la orilla y luego exploré algunas partes del río. En esa zona la corriente fluía mansa por un lecho lleno de rocas. Habré caminado una treintena de pasos, cuando en una pequeña cisura del fondo, apenas cubierta de agua, divisé un puñado de piedras. Yo no sé, ni sabía por entonces, distinguir a simple vista los diamantes en bruto. Si aún hoy me cuesta apreciarlos sobre una gamuza, imagínense aquella mañana a casi dos metros de distancia, bajo un charco de agua dormida. Pero lo cierto es que llevado por un olfato inexplicable me detuve, las contemplé y me dejé caer. Hundí mis manos en el agua y junté todas las que pude. Después, tendido en cuatro patas, sin moverme, alcé la vista. Algunos mineros estaban muy cerca. Podía oír el zumbido de sus voces. Uno estaba a pocos metros en compañía de un niño, aunque se entretenía examinando una pisada profunda. No tenía ganas de mirar hacia el lado donde estaban los guardias pero dirigí la vista hacia allí.

Un guardia descendía tranquilamente por la barranca. Vi cómo llevaba su fusil al hombro mientras le hacía señas a otro que vigilaba desde la cima. El que estaba arriba miraba pasar a los mineros y a

watched the events from the ravine also went down to the river. Some fathers took their children by the hand to look at the mine together. Soon an outright mob of people began to mill about slowly. The mine was complete chaos...

So I took advantage of the circumstances. I walked slowly along the bank and explored some parts of the river. In that area the current flowed calmly through a riverbed full of rocks. I must have walked some thirty steps when, in a little crevice at the bottom, barely covered by water, I spotted a fistful of stones. I didn't know then and I don't know now how to tell diamonds in the rough with my naked eye. If even today it is hard for me to appreciate them over a jeweler's cloth, just imagine me that morning looking at almost two meters distance through a pool of sleepy water. But the thing is that, driven by an unexplainable instinct, I stopped, pondered them, and let myself fall down. I delved my hands into the water and gathered all that I could. Then, stretched out on all fours and without moving a muscle, I looked up. Some miners were very close. I could hear the hum of their voices. One was just a few meters away with a child, but he was busy examining a deep footprint. I didn't want to look to the side where the guards had been, but I directed my sight there anyway.

One guard calmly made his way down the ravine. I saw how he was carrying his rifle at his shoulder while

sus familias con semblante preocupado. Los demás hablaban con Luisinho. Ni éstos ni los otros parecieron notar mi presencia. En ese instante pude haberme levantado de un salto pero lo pensé mejor, me incliné, rodé lentamente, caí de espaldas al agua y enseguida me puse de pie simulando un tropiezo. Me miré el dorso de las manos, la ropa, me agaché un poco y metí las piedras en un bolsillo. Saqué un pañuelo y me enderecé para limpiarme los brazos y la cara. Tenía pequeños raspones en los codos. No era nada. Mojé el pañuelo con agua del río y me lavé los sitios donde había algunas gotitas de sangre. Eché un ojo a la redonda. Sólo tenía una idea: salir de la mina antes de que se normalizara el trabajo. Pero un niño y un guardia me estaban fichando. Esperé.

El niño me campaneó de arriba abajo, sonrió y después salió corriendo en busca de su padre. El guardia, en cambio, permaneció quieto, sosteniéndome la mirada. Esperé hasta que dio media vuelta para reunirse con los otros. Entonces me dispuse a salir. Regresé hacia la orilla, trepé la barranca y alcancé ligero la cima. Me paré debajo de los árboles. Respiré hondamente. Un rumor débil de numerosas voces juntas subía hasta mí desde el río. Los mineros se mantenían en orden. Era como si la mayoría hubiera pagado la entrada para ver o escuchar un espectáculo. Francisca estaba en un recodo del río con un grupo de ellos, en el cual había uno,

he signaled to another who was watching from the top. With a worried face, the one up top was watching the miners and their families go by. The others were talking to Luisinho. None of them appeared to notice my presence. In that instant I could have jumped right on up, but thought better. I leaned over, rolling slowly, and fell back down in the water before getting on my feet again, pretending to trip. I looked at the back of my hands and my clothes. I bent down a little and slid the stones into a pocket. I pulled out a handkerchief and straightened myself up so that I could clean my arms and face. I had small scrapes on my elbows, nothing much. I wet the handkerchief with river water and washed the spots where there were drops of blood. I looked around. I had only one thought: leave the mine before everyone got back to work. But a child and a guard had their eyes on me. I waited.

The child stole a glance at me, smiled, and then took off running in search of his father. But the guard remained still, keeping me in his sights. I waited until he turned around to meet up with the others. Then I got ready to leave. I returned towards the bank, scaled the ravine, and quickly reached the top, stopping underneath the trees. I took a deep breath. A faint chorus of different voices rose towards me from the river. The miners kept themselves orderly, as if most of them had bought tickets to see or listen to a show. Francisca was at a bend in the

panzón y en mangas de camisa, que la sujetaba de la cintura. Estaba seguro de que nadie me había visto. Aunque al dar un último vistazo a la mina me topé con los ojos de Calús. Estaba de pie, en el medio de la barranca, descollando entre todos. Movió levemente la cabeza. Ni la expresión de su cara ni el modo de saludarme me dejaron tranquilo...

river with a group of them, and there was one potbellied miner in shirtsleeves who was holding her by the waist. I was sure no one had seen me, although when I took one last look around the mine, I caught the eyes of Calús. He was standing in the middle of the ravine, towering above the others. He tilted his head slightly. Neither the expression on his face nor his way of acknowledging me made me feel at ease...

Translator's Notes

1. In Angola a *soba* is a traditional community leader venerated for his wisdom, folk healing, and judicial interventions.