

Marguerite Itamar Harrison, translator. *Unremembering Me* by Luiz Ruffato. Dartmouth, Mass.: Tagus Press, 2018. 103p.

There are so many metaphors for what a translation is. It's a betrayal, per the old Italian adage. Or it's a groom kissing the bride through a veil, according to Jewish poet and novelist Chaim Nahman Bialik. For Marguerite Itamar Harrison, professor of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies at Smith College, it seems an act of veneration.

In her recent publication of Luiz Ruffato's *De Mim Já Nem se Lembra*, published by Tagus Press in 2018 with the English title *Unremembering Me*, Harrison identifies herself, before anything else, as a 'reader and admirer' of Ruffato's work. With this new translation, in addition to her scholarly work, Harrison has contributed significantly to the visibility of Ruffato's literature in the United States, for despite a 2014 English-language translation of his magnum opus, *Eles Eram Muitos Cavalos*, Luiz Ruffato remains relatively unknown to English-speaking audiences. *Unremembering Me* invites new readers to admire Ruffato's work.

Luiz Ruffato's autobiographical epistolary novel, *De Mim Já Nem se Lembra*, offers an intimate glimpse at 1970s Brazil. Ruffato transforms himself into a literary character in the book's introduction (A Necessary Explanation) and conclusion (Appendix), sections that bookend a series of letters from Ruffato's brother, Célio, writing from São Paulo to their mother in Catagüeses, Minas Gerais during the years 1971 through 1978. The letters trace Célio's experience as a migrant worker, his love affairs, his burgeoning participation in the labor union movement, his homesickness. Célio's life is cut short in a tragic automobile accident on a return trip to Minas. Ruffato discovers his brother's letters in a box at his parents' house, decades later when it is now his turn to visit from São Paulo. The letters that follow Ruffato's 'necessary explanation'

are painstakingly transcribed, punctuated with the occasional note providing historical context or commentary on Célio's signature. The novel, at once intimate and universal, personalizes the cog in the capitalist machine, paints a portrait of the working class living under dictatorship.

Despite its short length, Ruffato's epistolary novel seems no easy feat to translate. Harrison was tasked with adopting two narrative voices, each distinct, that of Luiz Ruffato, the narrator, and that of Célio, the letter writer, a distinction Harrison has mirrored nearly seamlessly. And while the formal experimentation of *Eles Eram Muitos Cavalos* is relatively absent here, there remains a certain penchant for long and twisty sentences, which Harrison elegantly maintains in her translation. She also maintains the foreignness of food and place names, while explaining, as briefly as possible, important dates in Brazilian history. In this way, Harrison has achieved a nice compromise between two opposing trends in translation theory: one, that the translation should read as if originally produced in the target language, and two, that a translation should preserve the strangeness of a foreign language. As translator, Harrison appears and disappears within the text exactly when the reader needs her to.

Her solutions to some of the thornier 'problems' of Portuguese are sly. For example, "um filó de poeira lubrina tudo" becomes "everything was blanketed with a thin layer of dust," or "desprezando para todo o tempo-será" is transformed as "shunning all futures-to-come." There is poetry in some of Harrison's choices – 'deserto' is rendered wasteland, "traíçoieras lembranças movediças" made a "treacherous quicksand pit of memories."

At times, the diction of the translation feels strange, especially in Célio's letters, lacking his effortless informal tone. One striking example might be where Ruffato's Célio describes his sister as a 'mulher da Ilha,' Harrison's Célio has dubbed her a 'hussy.' Yet, this mixed lexical bag might reveal more to the reader about Célio as a character than one-to-one equivalents between the languages. In her translator's note, Harrison describes Ruffato's style as attentive to 'cadence and diction' and characterizes his narratives as a 'complex and pluriphonic stream of consciousness.' In this way, Célio's shifting discursive registers remain faithful to Ruffato's original. Célio is, himself, a

contradictory, multidimensional character: responsible yet immature, biased yet compassionate, homesick yet realistic, traditional on family values yet politically progressive. It should come as no surprise, then, that his very way of speaking on the page also reflects these inconsistencies. Some of Célio's antiquated diction might even be forgiven by his admission: "People might think I'm old-fashioned... I can't stand these modern ways" (52). It is with great respect and admiration for the complex characters of Ruffato's fictional universe that Harrison molds the narrative of her translation.

A question remains: Harrison's title. Titles are notoriously tricky, be it of a translation or an original work. "Unremembering me" introduces an ambiguity absent from Ruffato's "de mim já nem se lembra." Who is performing this act of *unremembering*? Is it Célio's family who no longer remembers him after his death? The opening chapter, filled with the hustle and bustle of family life, only introduces Célio at the very end when his letters are discovered under a bed, forgotten after years spent unread. Or is Célio *unremembering* himself? In his transition from small town to big city, Célio undergoes a series of changes – his idealism fades as he witnesses workers' conditions, his contempt for his sister's suitors lessens, his heart's been broken. Harrison's title underscores the relationship between memory and belonging – *unremembering* and displacement – that is the novel's major theme. The section of the novel that contains Célio's letters is coupled with the epigraph "To you, who has already forgotten me." Perhaps *unremembering*, then, is a noun that identifies the process of loss and displacement that the characters, even Ruffato, suffer through, rather than a verb or action that the novel's players actively engage in, powerless as they are to the passage of time.

Harrison's title also suggests a new metaphor for translation. A translator must *unremember* her own voice in service of the text; she effectively effaces, displaces, herself in the transfer from one language to another. With her own translation, Harrison has *unremembered* herself in memory of Ruffato's work.

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