

Manuel Rivas

from *From Unknown to Unknown*

// Translated from the Galician by JONATHAN DUNNE //

Manuel Rivas writes fiction, plays and poetry in the Galician language of northwestern Spain. Spain has four official languages: Basque, Catalan, Galician and Spanish or Castilian. Everyone has heard of Basque, Catalan and Spanish, basically because the Basque Country and Catalonia had industry and Spanish is easy to remember, but Galicians were poor people, working the land and the sea, and frequently had to emigrate, so that Spaniards in Central and South America are often known as *Gallegos* and Barcelona is often referred to as Galicia's fifth province.

The story of the languages in Spain is simple. Two memorable dates in Spanish history: 711 and 1492. On the first, the Moors invaded the Iberian Peninsula (which today holds Spain and Portugal), reaching as far as Geneva, but quickly falling back due to the climate and what must have been overstretched resources. Christian kingdoms formed in the north of the Peninsula – Galicia, Asturias, Castile-Leon, Aragon, Catalonia – reconquering south, squeezing out Asturias and Aragon, and taking their language with them, until the Moors (who'd long been paying tribute in gold) were finally sent packing in 1492. So today Galician is spoken in Portugal (which, however, is a State and gets its own name: Portuguese), Catalan in Valencia and the Balearic Islands and Castilian Spanish in Spain. No one really likes to ask about the provenance of the Basque language.

Galicia is linked with Portugal geographically and culturally. To some, it may conjure up the golden age of Galician-Portuguese medieval poetry, lyric and ribaldry, the *cantigas de amigo* and *amor*, Alfonso X's religious hymns to the Virgin Mary, the incisive and heavily satirical *cantigas de escarnio* and *maldicir*. This was the language used by kings

in Toledo to write poetry while the more mundane tasks of law and administration were relegated to Spanish. To others, Galicia may suggest the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, the French Road, from a point marked wherever you start to Galicia's capital, the western tip of Christendom (with Rome in the middle and Jerusalem in the east). To others, it may evoke memories of weather reports and Cape Finisterre, the rocky and notoriously treacherous *Costa da Morte* or Death Coast, where many a ship, in Borrow's words, *must go to shivers instantly*. George Borrow passed through here on his mission to distribute Bibles in the vernacular, at which the locals' nostrils would quiver as they sniffed the flames of the Inquisition; a century later, Laurie Lee from here *walked out one midsummer morning*. The Spanish dictator from 1939 to 1975, Francisco Franco, was Galician; Fidel Castro's parents were originally from Galicia. Others may think of famous wines such as Albariño and Ribeiro or soccer teams such as Celta Vigo and Deportivo Coruña.

It was in Coruña where Manuel Rivas was born in 1957. Trained as a journalist, he is a regular contributor to the Spanish daily *El País*. But he is best known for his fiction, six novels and six collections of short stories to date, three of them published in English: *The Carpenter's Pencil* (2001), *In the Wilderness* (2006) and *Vermeer's Milkmaid & Other Stories* (2008). His themes are the Spanish civil war of 1936-9 and its consequences (a dictatorship is a state of *permanent war*); adolescence; and a brand of magic realism, in which inanimate objects respond warmly to being addressed by name and animals in a village communicate. Rivas strives to bear out the human stories in inhuman (or sadly human) situations – the light that alone can dispel the darkness of why are we so nasty to each other, the light that alone can spill through a crack (darkness can't), the light for which the pupil opens (this last an image from the Bulgarian poet Tsvetanka Elenkova's poem *Humility Is Never Enough*) – and it is here where Rivas reveals his Galician roots, a passion for storytelling, an almost obligatory sense of humor, a physiological reluctance to complain. Three stories from *Vermeer's Milkmaid* were turned into a film, *Butterfly*, as was *The Carpenter's Pencil* and this is because Rivas has cinematographic vision, he translates history.

The question is does the writer work in isolation, as is often maintained. I don't think so. He works in glorious conjunction with events, memories, stories and jokes he's heard, landscapes, feelings, all of which he translates on to a page. Does he work alone? No. I believe there is always a third point, someone working with us, through us. A common image for translation (which means *carry across*) is that of St Christopher carrying the Christ-child across the river (note that phonetically *Christopher* can easily be translated into *Christ over*). If you are unaware of the river's source, you are effectively lost, but we insist on drawing a straight line without reference to the third point (which would form a much more stable triangle: compare the Berlin Wall, for example, with the Pyramids), a straight line which responds in English to the ego or *I*. Translation, which is to say every human activity – after all, God brought the creatures to Adam in Genesis to name, not to create (*name*, which contains *mean* and *amen*, but we quickly turned it into *mine* as we turned *what* into *why*) – is not a straight *line* (even ideas come to us, and to invent means to find), but sadly we think it is, so we draw a line around property, around countries, which we can then go and fight over, we construct pipelines to conduct the water that falls from the sky, the oil that spills out of the ground, which we claim to be ours simply because we got there first (that *i* again), though the first will be last and the last, *lst*.

So it was I took these poems to be translated, sitting in the park. I then transported them home and, after lunch, checked the odd word in the dictionary and typed the poems up, in English. Physical movement, I believe, helps translation, as do time and distance. A change of scene can do wonders for inspiration. But we are always drawing that inspiration from somewhere, otherwise we wouldn't be *in spired*. Which is why, for me, it is a mistake to talk of *the translator as writer*, the translator as author, which she is not. There is only one author. I hate to say this, but the rest of us translate, be they words, soil, oil, air when we breathe, food when we eat, clay in bricks, silica in glass. None of these materials exists because of us. You can give a scientist a thousand years but, without the necessary ingredients, he will never come up with a carrot. In this sense, it is the writer who translates.

There are three ways we can move on from the line. We can refer to a third point, the river's source, and make a triangle. We can cross it out, a simple enough procedure, which, while it means we lose our life (the sign of the cross), also means we find it (the plus sign). A translator is constantly trying to do this as she ferries words to and fro across borders, cultural divides. Or we can start counting from zero, something we should teach our children at school, for words need a white page as much as music needs silence. In this way, we turn *i* into *o*. LIVE becomes LOVE and not EVIL.

The resultant three symbols – the triangle, A; the I denied, which is a square, +; and circle or zero, *o* – spell A+*o*, Alpha and Omega (found in AND). When we make this progression from the A of Creation to the I of the modern era to the O of recognition, we realize the question was never *what* or even *why*. Had Pontius Pilate known this when he asked Christ, 'What is truth?' (almost the most remarkable question ever formulated by a human), he might just have received an answer: I am.

– Jonathan Dunne

O cemiterio dos ingleses

É case unha obriga dicir algo da beleza
mais nin eu nin vós estamos en Brañas Verdes,
entre cabo Vilano e Tosto,
entre Arou e Camariñas.
Hai choivas de area e cinza
e mirei o lume cravarse nos ollos do raposo,
a cópula do garañón e a égoa,
o intre do mascato
na sombra da lubina,
o turbante da néboa
nos cumios onde aventa a inquedanza
de Hölderlin viaxeiro.

Se cadra no verán
dous ou tres de nós
pensem en ir a Brañas Verdes,
onde mirei os fuciños da vaga
bicar xuncos.
Se o facemos,
se dous ou tres de nós imos aló
pensaremos talvez en non voltar.
Na outra face das dunas
hai pequenos oasis
con herba de namorar
i estrela da xunqueira.
Un silencio de horta salgada,
un silencio aleilado
a doce sensación dun tesouro secreto,
dun fogar submarino,
o buraco da fruta,
a escafandra,
o polbo que durme nas furnas do tebeo.
Non se é imprescindíbel, xa sabedes,
e pensamos en quedarnos.

The English Cemetery

It's almost obligatory to say something of the beauty,
but neither you nor I are in Brañas Verdes,
between Cape Vilano and Tosto,
between Arou and Camariñas.
It rains sand and ash
and I watched the fire stick in the fox's eyes,
the copulation of stud and mare,
the gannet's moment
in the sea-bass' shadow,
the turban of mist
on the peaks where itinerant Hölderlin's
unease blows.

Perhaps in the summer
two or three of us
may think of going to Brañas Verdes,
where I watched the wave's muzzle
kissing reeds.
If we do,
if two or three of us go there,
we may even think of not returning.
On the other side of the dunes
are small oases
with sea pink
and starwort.
A salt garden's silence,
a dumbfounded silence,
the sweet sensation of a secret treasure,
of an underwater hearth,
the flute's hole,
the diving suit,
the octopus sleeping in the comic's grottoes.
One is not indispensable, you know,
and we're thinking of staying.

Ninguén é capaz de facer feliz a outro
durante moito tempo.
O pan ten menos peso.
As cousas van mal.
¿Qué se pode agardar
dun astro que se enfría,
dunha estrela murcha hai xa milenios?
O paraíso, ben pensado, non ten excesivo interese.
Definitivamente,
non se emprega en demasía a imaxinación
e a capacidade cerebral está infrautilizada.
O respecto, o amor...
Iso non existiu desde que teñen nome.
En fin,
o asunto este de Brañas Verdes
vai ser mellor deixalo.
Volveremos no verán.
Non chove en sete cores.
Rimbaud está en Abisinia
e comercia almasí.
Velaí tedes fotos do val de Brañas Verdes,
entre cabo Vilano e Tosto,
entre Arou e Camariñas.
Na cinta do casete está o eco do mar.
Nos petos, as cunchas de estrañas formas.
(Deixádeme no cadaleito o rabo do coello:
Din que trae boa sorte).

Eco do mar,
sí,
estrañas formas.

No one can make somebody else happy
for very long.
Bread is less heavy.
Things are going badly.
What's to be expected
of a cooling star
withered millennia ago?
Paradise, all things considered, is not so interesting.
For sure,
the imagination is not over-exerted
and the brain's capacity is under-used.
Respect, love...
That hasn't existed since they were named.
In short,
this business about Brañas Verdes,
it'd be better to leave it.
We'll come back in the summer.
It doesn't rain in seven colors.
Rimbaud is in Abyssinia,
trading ivory.
Here are photos of Brañas Verdes Valley,
between Cape Vilano and Tosto,
between Arou and Camariñas.
The cassette tape contains echoes of the sea.
In the pockets, shells with strange shapes.
(Leave the rabbit's tail on the coffin:
it's supposed to bring good luck.)

Echoes of the sea,
yes,
strange shapes.

Cultura

A esa hora,
naquela taberna,
todos os vellos parecían Samuel Beckett.

Culture

At that hour,
in that pub,
all the old men looked like Samuel Beckett.

Madrid

Non lanzarei un puñado da miña terra contra ninguén.
Ademais, non levo terra fresca.
Vou tan baleiro coma un vello sen televisor.
Se queres estar só na cidade,
vai a un lugar que fale da cultura de España,
entre a loucura atónita das estatuas.
Dirás que todos os homes aman unha terra,
sexa unha illa esmeralda,
unha horta de brocos a carón do lixo
ou unha bufarda na fronteira.
Certo. Pois ben,
eu son hoxe todos os homes.
Ese sentimento,
ese sentimento tan primario,
sube á cabeza
coma o fume das follas secas
que queima o xardineiro.
Madrid,
Madrid en outono
cheira a todas as terras,
a todos os destellos.
Xente que arrastra un tren serodio no iris,
unha bandexa de mazás,
unha granada,
xeraniums entre rellas,
a flor branca do cardo.
Se non miras aos ollos,
nunca saberás do outono de Madrid,
da mirada atónita das estatuas dos reis bárbaros,
saudosas dos bosques de bidueiros.
Tamén eu o fun,
un deses reis feroces solitarios,
devoradores de pardais e follas secas.
O meu país era un paxaro de fume

Madrid

I won't throw a fistful of my earth against anyone.
Besides, I don't have any fresh earth.
I'm as empty as a TV-less old man.
If you want to be alone in the city,
go to a place that talks of Spanish culture
amid the dazed madness of the statues.
You'll say all men love one land
be it an emerald isle,
a cabbage patch next to the rubbish
or a garret on the border.
Right. Well,
today I'm all men.
That feeling,
such a primary feeling,
goes to my head
like smoke from the dry leaves
the gardener burns.
Madrid,
Madrid in autumn
smells of all lands,
all exiles.
People trailing a late train in the iris,
a tray of apples,
a pomegranate,
geraniums behind bars,
the thistle's white flower.
Unless you look in the eyes,
you'll never know of autumn in Madrid,
the dazed gaze of the barbarian kings' statues
missing the birch forests.
I was one of them,
one of those fierce, lonely kings
devouring sparrows and dry leaves.
My country was a bird of smoke

que subía dun borrallo do Prado,
na avenida dos museos.
Canto vos quixen xuntos!
Madrid de outono,
capital mesterosa dun imperio
de colleiteiros de follaxe.
E a ti, miña terra,
chiffon de orballo
no iris das estatuas.

rising from an ember of the Prado
in the Avenue of Museums.
How I loved you both!
Madrid in autumn,
needy capital of an empire
of harvesters of leaves.
And you, my earth,
gauzy mist
in the statues' iris.

Once do un

Estou na cama cos nenos, a ver unha película, *Numa, a balea asasina*. Pasaría con eles toda a mañá neste leito, notando os cambios de calor: van coller mandarinas cos pés espidos e logo quéntollos meténdoos entre as coxas. É domingo. Dende a fiestra o cinto branco da xeadá cingue o val do río Pequeno. Logo, sob o sol de inverno, fervorean os campos cun alento animal. A xeito de lencería dourada, florecen as candeas en Somonte. Imos a Frixe, unha igrexiña de románico rural, arrodeada dun camposanto de cemento con moitísimos nichos (deixaron catro de pedra, quizais nun acto de misericordia). Non pode haber tantos mortos de aquí á fin do mundo. Ao neno chámalle a atención o nome de Palmira, gravado nun dos mármoreos negros. O camiño da praia de Nemiña xa non está orlado con aqueles postes dramaticamente revirados, que parecían saídos dunha milenaria peregrinaxe polas fondas corredeiras do mar. Son agora postes de formigón rectos e sólidos, uniformes, que os ollos acaban por ignorar. O engado deste mundo ten que ver coa extrema delicadeza do areal en contraste coa bravura do mar e as ás poderosas do grande paxaro celeste. Os nenos encontran, a carón dunha barca, un melgacho medio soterrado na area. É un delgado músculo do océano que, por milagre, aínda dá sinais de vida. Cando se retorce, contaxia de angustia o brazo. Corro con el cara o mar. Cheira a sangue salgado, boquea. Podo ver nos seus ollos escuros o medo e a esperanza. Botámolo desde as rochas, alfombradas de mexillón miúdo. As correntes arrástrano de novo cara á praia, pero el, por momentos, gobiñase e tenta gañar o mar aberto, empuxado polo noso desexo. Perdémolo de vista nun turbulento abrazo azul.

One Eleven

I'm in bed with the children, watching a film, *Numa the Killer Whale*. I'd spend the whole morning with them in this bed, noting the changes in heat: they go for some satsumas in bare feet, which I then warm between my thighs. It's Sunday. Through the window the white belt of frost girdles the river Small Valley. Later, in the winter sun, the fields seethe with an animal breath. Like golden lingerie, the candles in Somonte blossom. We visit Frixe, a little country Romanesque church surrounded by a cemetery with lots of cement niches and four left in stone, perhaps in an act of mercy). There can't be so many dead from now to the end of the world. The boy's attention is drawn to the name *Palmira* engraved on one of the black marble slabs. The path to Nemiña Beach is no longer lined with those dramatically twisted posts that seemed to have emerged from an ancient pilgrimage along the deep sea lanes. They're now straight, solid, concrete posts, uniform in nature, that the eyes end up ignoring. The charm of this world has something to do with the extreme fragility of the shore in contrast to the roughness of the sea and the powerful wings of the great heavenly bird. Next to a boat, the children find a lesser-spotted dogfish half buried in the sand. It's a thin ocean muscle, miraculously still showing signs of life. When it turns, it contorts its arm in agony. I run with it towards the sea. It smells of salty blood, and gaps. I can see fear and hope in its dark eyes. We throw it from the rocks, carpeted with tiny mussels. The currents drag it back towards the beach, but it gradually regains strength and tries to reach the open sea, impelled by our desire. We lose sight of it in a turbulent blue embrace.

Doce do un

Na C-552, no cruce cara a Transurfe, collemos para Coucieiro e de alí para O Castro. Botamos a andar, e no camiño que leva cara ás fervezas e as caldeiras do río, encontramos unha capeliña abandonada, fermosa peza neste antigo reino da melancolía. Ninguén puido levar o retablo porque é de pedra, a cuberta da ábsida está feita con laxes sobre as que prendeu un loureiro que medra vizoso. O resto do templo está a ceo aberto, as hedras coroan en arco a fachada. As paredes están acuareladas polo lique. Seica o lique, esa cúpula de alga e fungo, pode tardar cen anos en cubrir a palma dunha man. A capela debe facer as veces de corte porque está estrada de bosta. Alguén fixo con uralita un chamizo adosado para un tractor que parece parado desde hai anos, compartindo o garaxe con vellas rodas de carro do país. Un paisano dinos que a capela é na honra de Santo Eutel. Santo que? Santo Eutel. E logo murmura polo baixo, como dicindo que vos importará a vós o noso descoñecido santo. Imos por camiños de toxo cara á ferveza. Xusto no inicio da caída hai un muíño moi cativo, pequeno como casiña de xardín xaponés. A ferveza vai formando caldeiras que rebordan de espuma. As abas dos montes que encoran os ríos son unha sucesión de laxes superpostas, como dúas xigantescas mámoas naturais. A auga está tan xeadada que as mans ferven ao pouco de mollalas. De seixo en seixo, brinca a lavandeira real, miña señor.

One Twelve

On the A552, at the turning for Transurfe, we head for Coucieiro and from there for Castro. We start walking and, on the path leading to the waterfalls and the river's cauldrons, come across an abandoned chapel, a beautiful piece in this ancient kingdom of melancholy. Nobody was able to remove the stone reredos; the roof of the apse is made with slabs of stone, home to a thriving laurel. The rest of the church is open; ivies crown the façade in an arch. The walls are watercolored with lichen. They say that lichen, that association of alga and fungus, can take a hundred years to cover the palm of a hand. The chapel must sometimes serve as a sty because it's littered with manure. Somebody has made a lean-to with Uralite for a tractor that seems not to have moved in years and shares the garage with old country cart-wheels. A local informs us that the chapel is in honor of Saint Eutel. Saint who? Saint Eutel. And then mutters something about what do we care for their neglected saint. We head down paths of gorse to the waterfall. Right at the top there's a tiny mill, small like a hut in a Japanese garden. The waterfall carves out cauldrons, overflowing with foam. The mountain slopes damming the rivers are a succession of superimposed slabs, like two enormous natural dolmens. The water is so cold your hands burn as soon as you wet them. Milady, the grey wagtail, leaps from stone to stone.

Dezaseis do un

O homeless deu un paso adiante sobre o mar de nubes e caíu do cadro de Caspar David Friedrich. Ao baixar as escaleiras do Metro, na noite xeada, levaba ao lombo a cama de Van Gogh en Arlés.

One Sixteen

The homeless took a step out on to the sea of clouds and fell from Caspar David Friedrich's painting. As he went down the Underground steps, in the frozen night, he carried Van Gogh's bed in Arles on his back.