

On learning about yourself



National Book Award-winning writer and translator Bruna Dantas Lobato discusses triangulating influences while translating, the complicated results of winning a major award, and the effects of a sleep disorder on creativity.

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As told to Hurley Winkler, 3951 words.

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When you and I first met over the summer, you were working on the Portuguese translation of your debut novel, *Blue Light Hours*. You sounded really energized about this translation because your mom, who speaks and reads Portuguese but not English, will be able to read it. And this is a particularly special thing because the book is about a transnational mother-daughter relationship. What was it like to translate this novel with your mother as the first person in line for its translated audience?

It was an amazing experience because it felt so personal. It almost felt like, suddenly, the novel was also epistolary, because I was sending it to my mom. And she was in such a hurry to read it: she would be like, "Have you translated any more pages yet?" I read it out loud to her as I translated it, which is not usually how I go about this stuff. And I would tell her, "I still have a lot of editing to do." But she wouldn't let me take my time. She was like, "Give it to me already. Other people have read it, and I don't know what it says."

Right now, my mom is partially blind. She has a surgery coming up. So there was this added emotional layer to me. I know she can't physically read anything right now, so even if I sent her a PDF or I sent her a print version of the book, even though it's translated into Portuguese, it still can't fully reach her. I mean, talk about distance. So it was also very emotional for me to be reading it out loud and for her to be hearing it through my voice. I know she's going to read it many times, but not yet. Right now, we can only talk this way.

I wrote the book very much as a love letter to her, even though it wasn't necessarily for her to read it right away like this. It meant a lot for me to have her read it and feel everything that I wanted her to feel in her bones: how much I love her, and how much I miss her, and also how much I didn't leave behind, even though I moved countries and languages.

It was also, I think, a very tall order to translate into Portuguese, for the very first time in my life. It helped that I was an experienced translator working into English. I have to find a voice anew, hone it, make sure it doesn't falter, and deliver the book as a cohesive whole. It was also a book that I knew very well, so it was sometimes easy to read into things that weren't on the page. I had a little sticky note next to my computer that just said, "Translate the page." Not everything else that existed in my head or outside of it or my memories or my concerns. When I translate other authors, I have to focus on that, too: on the text as an object, the book as an object of its own. Not the author's biography, not what I think of them, not what I know of them. None of that is verifiable, you know? So it was interesting to see the book that way, not from the inside of my head, but from the outside, a very new way of looking at it. It allowed me to experience the book as a reader as well, which I hadn't done yet.

Was there any part of you, while translating for the very first time from English to Portuguese, that wished

you'd taken that on with a book that wasn't your own? Or was it better to begin with your own novel?

As a translator in English, I always had a very strong sense of my own voice, and I knew my own writing, and I knew how to play with the English language. I would experiment with it to reach these other voices and then produce these other texts that are nothing like anything I would ever write.

It was interesting to have the chance to develop my own sense of self and my own voice in Portuguese. I appreciated that side of it. But on the other hand, it was also, I felt, very inadequate at times, and then I did prep. I would do my research and I would do homework pretty much the same way I do with other authors. I'm used to knowing exactly what I want to say, but in this case, I'd think, "Okay, I know that I was referencing these authors, that there was an echo of this other scene that I studied in order to write this one. I'm having a hard time writing it in Portuguese. Let me see how this Jamaica Kincaid scene or this Sigrid Nunez scene sounds like in Portuguese. Then I can triangulate my influences again."

That's so interesting.

I do that with authors all the time. Like with Stênio Gardel, who wrote *The Words That Remain*, it was like, "I know he's been influenced by Faulkner," or Jeferson Tenório has been influenced by James Joyce, and then I go look, and I study those authors, and I understand what to do.

When I was translating Moldy Strawberries, which is this very, very lyrical story collection about the AIDS crisis, I read all of this poetry from the AIDS crisis, all of these experimental queer books and watched documentaries. I really didn't expect that I would have to do that with my own work.

So there are pros and cons, I think, to coming into my own work very much like it was a foreign text. I was working with this language that, of course, is my mother tongue, but I don't actually speak it every day anymore, and that I don't read as much in it anymore and rarely write in it.

When you were reading the translation to your mom as you went, did she ever have feedback or suggestions for changes or anything like that? Did she get involved in the process at all?

She was kind of processing real life, finding a way to narrativize her own experiences through the book, more so than she was looking at the writing. For her, it was more like a life exercise. She said, "I'm trying to figure out how we live now, knowing that this story is out there."

What do you think she meant by that?

I think it's a little new to her to see a character that people might think is her, even though it is not her. She's like, "Oh, I'm going to have to tell your aunt that this didn't happen. She would be shocked." It was new to my mom to have this gaze and this persona version of her. I think she gets a kick out of it, to be honest. She's like, "Oh, how interesting. I have this carefree version of me who drinks alcohol," and she's very straight edge, doesn't put a single drop of alcohol in her mouth. In many ways, very, very different from the mother character.

She was really intrigued by how and why I made up stuff. She was like, "I can see how this makes for a better story," or she'd be like, "We had an outrageous detail. Why didn't you include it? It was so fun," and I'm like, "Oh, maybe a little too fun." We did have this conversation where she was understanding a little bit, I guess, the driving force of the book versus what our lives are like, which are very, very different. Life is so boring.

Blue Light Hours took you seven years to write. How did you see it through?

I am a very slow writer, and I also was a full-time freelancer working with literature and publishing, so I was writing a ton for work and doing other kinds of writing. I found it really, really difficult to do the thing that people tell you to do: just write every day and structure your time accordingly. Instead, I would do these very,

very, very immersive spurts. For two weeks, I would do nothing but live in the world of the book, and then I would write. I would close off one chapter. I wanted each chapter to function mostly like a self-contained story. So then when I went to do my other jobs, like translate a book or write readers' reports, I knew that that chapter was mostly sealed, even though I would do tons of editing and all of that.

I am one of those writers who only moves to the next sentence after the previous one is perfect. Again, a terrible process, to be honest with you. Very paralyzing. Didn't help me move toward my writing goal that much, but it's the only process for me. I'm a very obsessive writer and very sentence-driven. I focus on the line as a unit, and I roll the sound in my mouth for a long time, always very focused on rhythm, on sound, on all of that. Sometimes I would hold one paragraph for several days, trying to play with it. I do love a quiet, introspective novel and a novel that gives the characters room to grieve instead of just pushing them forward all the time.

Nowadays, how are you balancing your fiction writing practice with your translation practice? Do you feel like you're able to compartmentalize and work on both at the same time? Or do you tend to want to be more monogamous with your work?

I am very monogamous with my work. Usually, I will be translating something, and I might take a little break and then focus on my writing, and back and forth, but I can never work on two things at the same time.

Right now, my focus has been very heavily on craft, on rethinking my process and thinking through things like, "Huh, well, how on Earth does a story work, or a novel chapter, or a novel as a whole? Or does the sentence have an arc?" That's all I'm doing right now. I can't also be thinking of new fiction. I don't know why that is. I envy people who can do lots of things at once. Even if I could do that, I would break up my day in very distinct halves and not mix them too much. It might have something to do with immersion or with inhabiting a voice. I need the writing to feel lived in and embodied, and I don't know that I can do that and be fully present in the text right away. It always takes me a little bit of warming up.

How do you know when a translation project is one you want to work on?

I've been wrong before, but for the most part, I know because of the voice. Even if it's a voice that's very, very different from mine, if I can play with the syntax, if I understand its rhythms, I feel like it fits my body. It fits the rhythm of my breath. I can do it. I can sustain it for a long time. For the most part, I have to feel a relationship to the character and to the author's voice.

How have your fiction writing and literary translating practices influenced one another?

I think there are two things that translation has given me. One is confidence. Just by having practiced different styles, different voices, different plots, I feel like I can take on a page. I am not that afraid of the page. I might not know what I'm going to write yet, and it might take time, but I know I'm going to get there. And confidence is everything in fiction, right? It's the trick that we're selling.

And then the other thing that translation has given me is, honestly, an opportunity to try on different styles and know how to execute them. It's also made me think of language very much as a medium. The way that maybe someone working with watercolors has constraints they're working with, and then if you're doing oil painting, there are these other constraints. Portuguese is its own medium. It has its own problems and constraints and difficulties, and it has its own drying time. And then the English language also has its own.

The process of translation as meditation on language is so enviable for me as someone who doesn't speak or write in another language. Do you have any ideas for how a writer might be able to access that kind of meditation in a way that is not translation?

A lot of my students are brand new to creative writing and don't speak another language, and I'm like, "Oh, I wish I could tell them what it's like to have an entire book go through you." When I translate, I can hold that entire book in my body. From beginning to end, the whole arc. And I wish I could share with them how to do that

without actually having to write a book, which is a whole other thing. And one way I found is to have them write in someone else's style completely, and I call it "writing under the influence."

During your National Book Awards acceptance speech, you thanked your publisher for putting your name on the cover, and you told the crowd, "Translators are not mysterious fairies working in the dark." In your view, what work is still to be done by publishers on this issue, and what can readers do to support translators?

There's so much that publishers can do to inform readers that there is somebody putting in all this artistic labor: moving these texts, experiencing these texts, and enacting these texts for this reader. That absolutely starts with putting the [translator's] name on the spine and all of that. I've been lucky to have been included in book tours with my authors and things like that. They really make a difference, I think, in helping people understand, "Oh, this book wasn't just born like this. There was somebody making choices for every word and for a reason," as opposed to an attitude I see in publishing often, which is to trick the reader into thinking, "Actually, this wasn't translated at all." They try to give the reader this false sense of stability, like it's a historical text that has never been touched. It was always perfect as is, like there's a definitive version of the text, and it's only one. I think it makes for a much more interesting book and process and reading experience to think of the book as something that is unstable and that has been moved and that you too can engage with, and play with, and then have a completely different result. Imagine how much richer people's reading experiences would be if we read Proust or Tolstoy not as a painting in the Louvre next to a security guard, but as a painting that you can touch and feel the texture for and maybe even mess with a little bit.

I think a lot of artists wonder how an artist's life may or may not change when they win an award as huge as the National Book Award. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to share some of your experience with that. How has winning the National Book Award made your life better? Are there any ways in which it's been maybe even a little overrated or not life-changing the way everyone in the world thinks it is?

Thank you for asking that question. I wish someone had answered that question so I could take a look. Right now I'm dying to ask someone else, "Did you have that experience, too, or is this just me?"

The thing is that my brain is just as broken as it was before. Winning this award might have fixed my life on the outside, but it certainly didn't fix my psychological issues or my sense of self. I am just as insecure as I was the day before I got the award, and just as scared as well, and that part has not changed. I really wish it had because I'm so sick of being afraid, afraid that my career will end, that I will never write anything again: all the fears that I've always had. Every time I write a story, I'm like, "I bet that was the last one." I still feel that way. That part has not changed.

Many things have changed. I mean, I absolutely do not take it for granted. It's been amazing. I've been able to get a good job. Maybe I would have gotten some kind of job anyway, but it's certainly easier to apply for a fancy teaching job when you can say, "I've won this big award." I know that it's easier to get in the door. I think that's the main difference. Being able to advocate for myself a little better, like, "Oh, you can't underpay me. I won't allow it." Before, I might have wanted to say, "I won't allow it," but I allowed it fine all the time.

I moved just now to Iowa a month ago, and I brought my award wrapped in a sweater in my trunk, just like with all my other shit, and I don't know that it's quite the magical object that it might have seemed when I was unable to touch it. But it's hollow. It even jingles a little because there's something loose inside. It's still very heavy physically. Actually, it's incredibly heavy. It's more than 10 pounds, and given it's so small, it's always kind of shocking when I lift it, but then I'm like, "Oh, it's an object, kind of like I have a paperweight." And then it kind of demystifies. It all falls apart, all the allure. Oh, gosh, I romanticize! I still romanticize these things so bad, but it's much more human now to understand, like, "Goddamn it, is there nothing that's going to shine on me and then make my problems go away?" No, that shit doesn't exist. That doesn't exist, it turns out, but certainly things can make your life easier. You know?

Thank you for that very honest answer. It's so helpful to me to hear that, because it does seem like a magic wand that will make all of your problems go away. But of course it's not. How could it be? That does not exist.

I know. I know. I guess if I could summarize it in one sentence, it would be that it might help your professional standing cosmetically, but it won't heal your psychic wounds. Thank God I have a therapist.

You shared with me that you have a sleeping disorder that keeps you awake pretty much all night long. How has that impacted your writing practice?

Oh, gosh. I can never write in a coffee shop or do whatever it is that other people do. It's always been hard for me to hold down a job because it's so hard for me to be awake during the day. I still nap during the day a little bit like a baby.

For me, writing is always this almost magical activity you do when time is really still and there's no one else around, and you do it in secret a little bit, so it's always felt like something really private, and I have a hard time sharing my writing with other people. It's hard for me to imagine that other people could see me writing. There is something to be said about something that you only do when you're in hiding, you know? And I've always been a little embarrassed about my own writing. Even with my agent: she's always like, "Please just send it to me," and I am doing whatever I can to push it off and make sure she doesn't see it for another six months. I love having a private inner life like this, but then it does mean that my husband is like, "You've been writing a story collection?" I'm like, "Oh, yes. I didn't mention it?"

I have a feeling that the second I am working on a project again, I will want to work on a project and won't be able to do it during the day. I'll get overwhelmed, like, "Oh, gosh, there's sunshine, there's noise." Then I'll stay up all night and do it, and the whole thing will be back exactly to where it was before.

You have a pet rabbit named Tulipa, and I've also noticed from Instagram that one of your hobbies is making miniatures. From one outsider's perspective, it feels like you've built this really delightful life for yourself. Does writing feel as enjoyable to you as petting your rabbit or working on a miniature does?

It does. When I'm in the middle of not knowing what the writing is, I hate it for a little bit. But then the second I get to the moment of knowing, which is what I've been searching for all along, there's nothing that can match that high.

And I love all the other things I do. I love translating. I love miniatures. I have so much fun doing all of those things, but there is something about writing that I haven't been able to find anywhere else, something honestly life-affirming that I'm like, "Everything makes sense. In this one moment, in this one second, everything feels right. Everything makes sense," that I really do love.

Writing does feel as blissful as petting Tulipa, who is the softest creature I've ever touched. She's a star. She's absolutely beautiful and very clever, and I do think that she loves that I'm up all night because she's also up all night.

Were you drawn to rabbits for that reason?

I didn't know how intensely they slept during the day and how much they were active at night until I had her, but the second that happened, I was like, "I can never not have a rabbit for the rest of my life." I've always felt pretty strange and wrong about not being able to be up during the day. I tried to fix it. I struggled with it and I wrestled with it a ton and slept in a tube at a sleep clinic and went to neurologists who were like, "Listen, there isn't anything we can do. We tested your brain, and it only comes alive at night." And I mourned that. I tried to be like everyone else, but then with Tulipa, things make sense. I'm like, "Of course. This is just what we do." And in the middle of the night, she gets the zoomies, or she's doing pirouettes up in the air, and so am I. The second it's 10 P.M., I have a dance party and I want to write up a storm. She makes me feel like things are right in the world, and that's a very lovely feeling to have.

Bruna Dantas Lobato recommends:

Making something with your hands.

Lying down on the floor.

Writing one friend a letter: a letter that is genuine, not just pleasantries.

Reading a very short book in one sitting.

Drinking a cup of tea.

Name

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Vocation

writer, translator

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