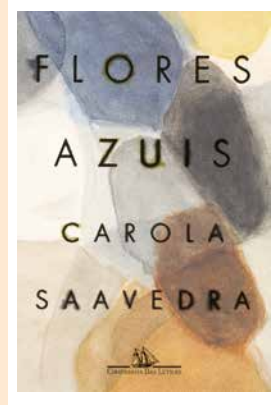


Translation diary



Daniel Hahn I'm translating a novel. It's written in Portuguese, and it needs to be written in English. There is a Brazilian novelist at one end, and an American publisher at the other, and there's me in the middle, tasked with giving the publisher exactly the same book the novelist has written, keeping it identical in absolutely every conceivable respect, except that I've got to change all the words. The novel is **Blue Flowers** by Carola Saavedra. Or, to be more accurate, the novel is still **Flores Azuis**, for now. **Blue Flowers** is what it's got to be when I'm done with it. So I have to immerse myself in Carola's book, in Portuguese, and write it again for the publishers in English. The process is both simple and impossible, and I'm going to be describing it on this blog.

1 In this scene, A, the main woman character, describes the moment her lover leaves her:

Eu não disse nada, não chorei, não pedi explicações, não te implorei para ficar. Eu apenas permaneci ali, imóvel, muda, deitada na cama, enquanto você se vestia, pegava a mochila e ia embora.

A rough translation might be:

I didn't say anything, I didn't cry, I didn't ask for explanations, I didn't implore you to stay. I merely stayed there, immobile, mute, lying on the bed, while you dressed, took your rucksack and went away.



- 2** ‘Implore’ isn’t quite right, is it? ‘Beg’ would be better. And ‘immobile’, similarly – I prefer ‘still’ or ‘unmoving’. In both cases my first quick version just used words that stayed close to the Portuguese (‘implore’ for ‘implorei’, ‘immobile’ for ‘imóvel’), but we need to move away a little further in order to arrive somewhere more like normal English. I think ‘merely’ is a bit too formal for A’s voice here, too.

I didn’t say anything, I didn’t cry, I didn’t ask for explanations, I didn’t beg you to stay. I just stayed there, unmoving, mute, lying on the bed, while you dressed, took your rucksack and went away.

- 3** There are an awful lot of ‘I’s in that first sentence, aren’t there? In Portuguese there’s an ‘Eu’ (‘I’) at the beginning of the first sentence and an ‘Eu’ at the beginning of the second, so the sentences are perfectly balanced. As you can see, I’ve removed a pair of ‘I’s. And we have a ‘rucksack’ which should probably be a ‘backpack’, to minimize how UK-ish it sounds to US readers.

I didn’t say anything, I didn’t cry, didn’t ask for explanations, didn’t beg you to stay. I just stayed there, unmoving, mute, lying on the bed, while you dressed, took your backpack and went away.

- 4** Now, that first sentence ends on the word ‘stay’ – which would be fine...except that ‘stay’ appears again, three words later. Hmm, so now I’ve got to change that, too. One option is ‘I didn’t beg you not to go’, which helps because we imagine A saying ‘Please don’t go!’ rather than ‘Please stay!’, which isn’t quite the same.

I didn’t say anything, I didn’t cry, didn’t ask for explanations, didn’t beg you not to go.

- 5** I’ve also got to decide if the man is dressing, or getting dressed, or getting himself dressed, and my decision will be as much about the rhythm of the sentence as anything else. And I don’t like the ending – ‘went away’



is very weak. I'd rather end solidly on one word – just 'left'.

I just stayed there, unmoving, mute, lying on the bed, while you got dressed, took your backpack and left.

- 6** Right. So – we're done now, surely? Um, not quite... I'd prefer 'picked up your backpack' to just 'took your backpack' – I think the latter might sound as though he's taking it from her? And I'm not sure about 'mute', either. I think 'silent' would do. So how about this, then?

I didn't say anything, I didn't cry, didn't ask for explanations, didn't beg you not to go. I just stayed there, unmoving, silent, lying on the bed, while you got dressed, picked up your backpack and left.

Better?