

OTHER

Writing the Same Body Twice — Microfiction, Self-Translation, and Controlled Loss

by Azul Rivera

When I translate my own microfiction between Spanish and English, the text is never untouched. Some images disappear, sentences shorten while others lengthen, and rhythms collapse. Self-translation is a process in which the reconfiguration of the text takes place. As a writer, I welcome each transformation because it pushes me to think from a different linguistic and cultural angle.

Before the Body / Antes del Cuerpo (Schmidt & Hallowey, to be published November 2026) is a bilingual literary project that departs from the question: What happens to us before language fully settles? I use microfiction because its brevity lets me focus on a moment, an image, a fragment, or a memory before it develops into a full story.

Writing microfiction in two languages means the text must exist in a linguistic border: a place not governed by either language. Within this context, reconfiguration of different literary elements — rhythm, imagery, and tone — takes place. The writer has an active role in the process and starts to understand self-translation as a second opportunity for writing.

The following fragment from *Before the Body* shows how a text moves between two languages:

Spanish version:

Les tenía miedo a esos líquidos densos de colores.

Mamá sonreía al mirarlos todos.

Su parpadeo detenía el paso:

quedaba justo allí.

English version:

I was afraid of those thick, colored liquids.

Mom smiled as she looked at all of them.

Her blink would halt their movement:

it stopped right there.

The Spanish version progressively shortens. The rhythm falls naturally, building up a cadence of the fragment through the words at the end of each sentence: *colores, todos, paso, allí*. The English version, in contrast, shows a more compact first sentence. The second and third lines also lengthen. As a result, the rhythm must be adjusted according to the demands of the new language. In this fragment, meaning is preserved, but cadence isn't.

The following fragment shows differences at the level of tone:

Spanish version:

No sé si era de día o de noche.
Mamá me dijo que con su manta
estaría más calientito.

English version:

I don't know if it was day or night.
Mom told me that with her blanket
I would be warmer.

In the Spanish version, the word *calientito* does not have a direct equivalent in English. *Calientito* carries affection, intimacy, and connects deeply with the tone of the mother in the text. In the English version, however, “warmer” is more neutral and distant in register. By trying to find a more equivalent choice in English, the writer risks sounding excessive or disrupting the tone. This is what controlled loss entails: a practice that learns to negotiate with loss.

The next fragment is an example of what a writer decides to retain in the text:

Spanish version:

Papá lo miró y me acercó el verde,
ahora mi pecho olía a madera,
café seco,
palta brillante,
pan de algodón.

English version:

Dad looked at it and brought the green closer.
Now my chest smelled of wood,
dry coffee,
bright avocado,
cotton bread.

The Spanish version has *pan de algodón*, an image that keeps its sense of strangeness in the English version, “cotton bread.” This is important because this fragment depends on sensory confusion in a world that is not fully formed. Therefore, the text keeps not only its content but also its perceptual instability.

The previous examples show self-translation as a process of selection rather than preservation. The writer is actively involved and decides what stays, what needs to be transformed, and what is left out. This is what controlled loss means.

This process of selection is intensified when writing in English as a Second Language. The writer must not only be aware of linguistic construction and meaning but also evaluate the text as it moves between two languages. In this context, every decision made over a word becomes more visible and deliberate.

In microfiction, self-translation tests its limits. The concise space within this form demands extreme precision. Every word carries weight, and a single shift in rhythm or tone changes the entire texture of the piece.

As these examples suggest, when a text is translated, it never stays untouched. Self-translation does not produce a copy of a text. It produces another body. One that stems from what stays as much as from what is left behind.