

The Tension Between Translation and Interpretation in Ana Maria Caballero's "Being Borges"

By Virginia Valenzuela

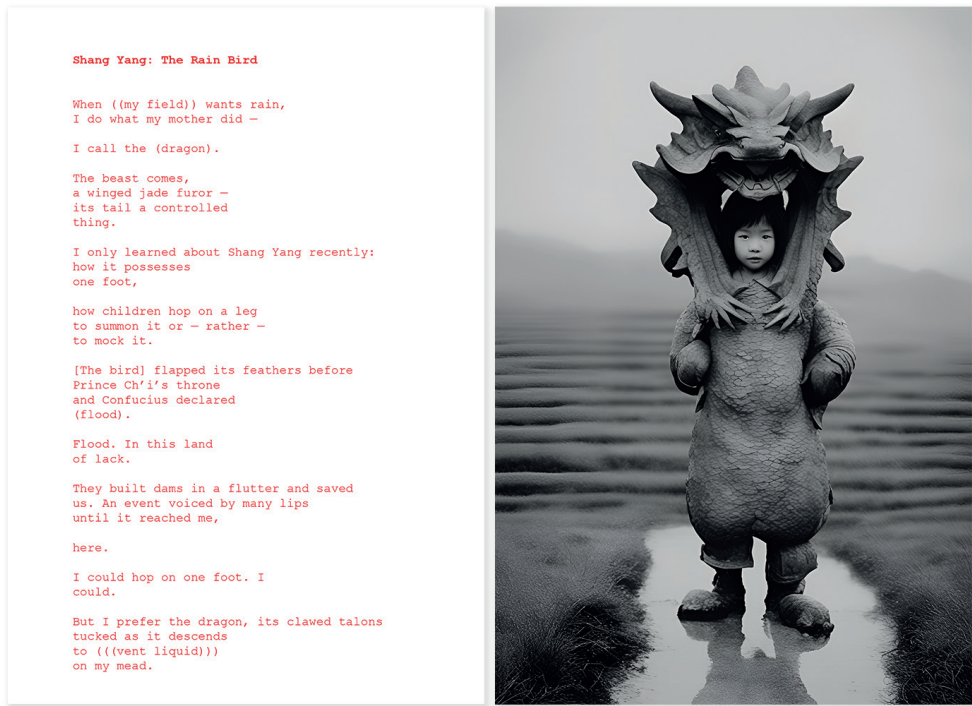
What happens to an artwork once the artist whispers its existence into the world? The artist's intentions, though primal to the work, disappear, and it is but the viewer's reaction that defines its meaning. The same thing can be said of any thoughts we are brave enough to translate into the spoken or written word. The listener, or reader, decodes our meaning. The original is at the mercy of the interpreter, just as the interpreter is at the mercy of the skill and precision used to create the original.



Ana Maria Caballero, Shang Yang: The Rain Bird, 2023 – a collage

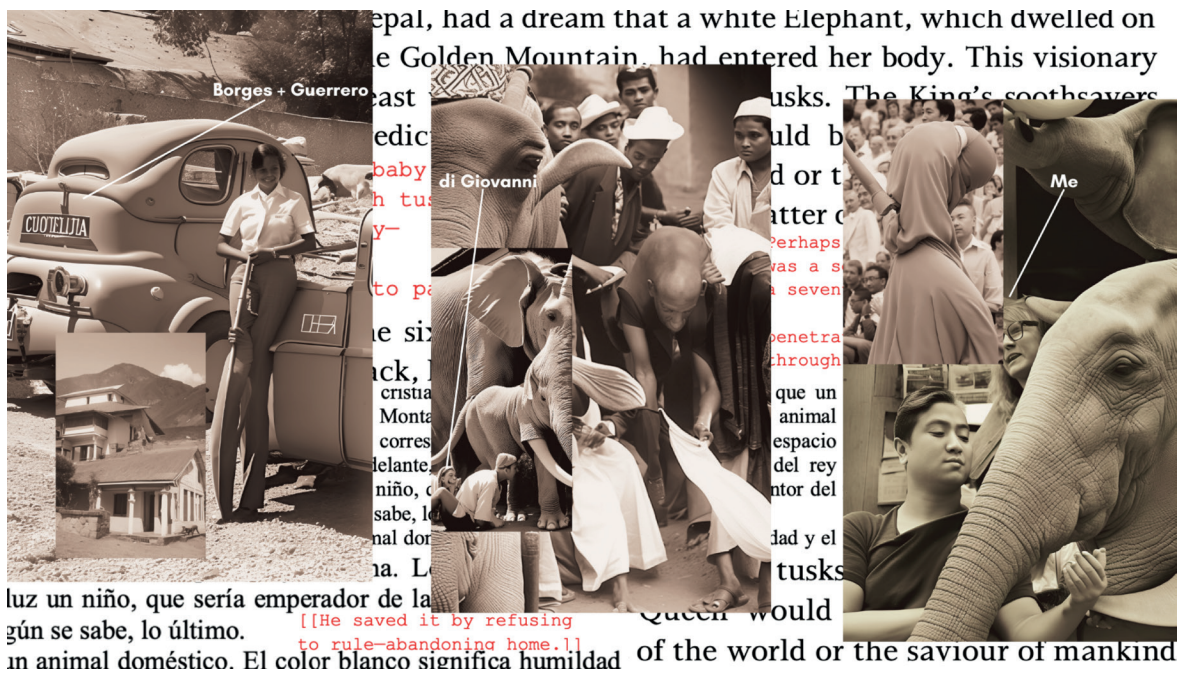
It was Jorge Luis Borges, an incredible literary mind, and himself an accomplished translator of particularly difficult works, who said that “The dictionary is based on the hypothesis—obviously an unproven one—that languages are made up of equivalent synonyms.” If all acts of communication come down to the challenge of translating unequal signals, then how are we to endeavor to translate thoughts, stories, and images from one language into another?

Translation is, after all, a form of rewriting, an attempt to capture the meaning, music, and intention of the original. Even for Borges, who collaborated on the first English translation of his “Book of Imaginary Beings,” there was an impossibility of being truly faithful to the text. Language affects the way we convey meaning, the way we word things, and indeed, the way we see the world.



Ana Maria Caballero, Shang Yang: The Rain Bird, 2023 – Poem + image generated by Caballeros poem

Ana Maria Caballero’s series “Being Borges” is rooted at the crux of signifier and signified, of language and interpretation, of precision and ambiguity. Using artificial intelligence to translate the original text, the original translation, and her own original interpretation into images, Caballero exacerbates the differences between three different voices attempting to describe the exact same thing. The process of using AI, a machine that has been trained on human data—and yet, is not human, and thus not able to cover up its biases—reveals simultaneously, the importance of word choice, and the futility of word choice.



Ana Maria Caballero, The Elephant that Foretold the Birth of the Buddha, 2023 – a collage

Each artwork in “Being Borges” weaves together the original Spanish, the English translation, and the poet’s own interpretations together in a textual tapestry that is constantly interrupted by the AI-generated images these words conjure up. Like Sophie Calle’s Suite Vénitienne, the artworks attempt to approach their subject, but never get close enough to put their finger on it. The three voices, along with the images of various sizes inspired by each, create imperfect triptychs full of hints, but bereft of clarity.

Caballero’s experiment in translation forces the viewer to consider the inadequacy of communicating across languages, cultures, and spans of time. It also, at base, questions the necessity of precision in such an endeavor. After all, is it the artist’s ability to convey themselves that draws us to their work, or rather, the space they leave for our own interpretation?



Ana Maria Caballero, A Bao A Qu, 2023 – a collage