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# If I Should Die

by José F.A. Oliver

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*Translated by* Jon Cho-Polizzi

## Translator's Introduction

José Francisco Agüera Oliver is a prominent German and Spanish-language writer. He holds the distinction of being the only recipient of both the Adelbert-von-Chamisso-Preis—awarded to German-language writers of so-called *Migrationshintergrund* (immigrant background)—and the Thaddäus-Troll-Preis—a prize awarded to German-language writers who produce literature in one of the highly regionally specific German dialects. In addition to numerous other literary prizes including the 2015 Basler Lyrikpreis and the 2007 Kulturpreis Baden-Württemberg, Oliver has worked as writer-in-residence in Warwick, Cairo, Dresden, and most recently Istanbul. He has also worked as visiting guest professor at such diverse universities as Montana State University and MIT. His most recent work, [Gedichte aus Istanbul 4 Briefe & 10 Fotow:orte](#), was published in 2016.

The son of Andalusian *Gastarbeiter*—guest workers who immigrated to Germany with temporary work permits in the 1960s following the immense German labor shortage in the wake of the Second World War—Oliver was born in the village of Hausach in the Black Forest. He grew up, as he deems it, *zweisprachlich*—between languages: the Andalusian dialect of his parents' immigrant community, the Alemannic of his Black Forest village, and the literary German and Spanish he discovered through poetry.

The following translation is one of a very recent work by the author, to be published in the 2016 publication of the literary magazine [Konzepte](#) (Nr. 35). It was first read publically in interlingual form (alternating verses and languages with projected translations provided behind the readers) by both the author and translator on February 23, 2016 at Dwinelle Hall in Berkeley, California. The cooperative work between the author and translator to provide the first English-language collection of his prose work is ongoing.

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Entre e sono e sonho  
entre mim e o que em mim  
E o quem eu me suponho  
corre um rio sem fim.

- Fernando Antonio Nogueiro De Seabra Pessoa, “Entre o Sono e Sonho”

Between sleep and dream,  
between myself, what is inside me,  
and that which I presume to be,  
flows an unending river.

Every decision is also a renunciation, Spinoza writes, and my father once mused that emigration changes our identity. Early on, these two statements taught me the validity of perception. They became the foundation of many of the realizations I built around them, binding together for me a well-provisioned and benedictory bindlestick. Another sentence would come to me which served as answer to my earliest crises. Long after, it still brought me to pause, allowed me to observe many of my stances and decisions from a different point of view. Angles which accepted or expanded upon an altogether different positionality. I no longer remember who it was exactly who said the words to me upon hearing that I held a Spanish passport. I think it was a small boy from South America. From Peru. The exploitation of the colonies, so he made known to me, *gringuito*, had made Europe rich. And who could contradict him? Certainly not I. I wouldn't know how. *Initipa huajascar huajani*—tears cried from the sun—means *gold* in Quechua.

What more can I say of my relationship to the words that established for me both linguistic and tactile guideposts, sentences that have opened unforeseen horizons? Which of the many quotations should I cite, which of those that still shape me to this day? Perhaps one thing more: History seems... no, better said: History **is** a teddy bear in mud. An image which freezes; freezes with a single utterance. “No one freezes differently,”<sup>1</sup> occurs to me, the title of a book of poetry by Joachim Sartorius. History is a teddy bear in mud. But these words reach further than the past. They emerge today with frightening vehemence and with unexpected immediacy—nefarious, silence-burnishing metaphor-dilemma of Europe. Displacement. Flight. Exile.

Time—this much I can tell you—time gnaws on these words. Gnaws them to death. To the very bone.

Did or do I think of the words I encountered early on in life, now as the boy of “Spanish origin” whom I, in my youth and adolescence, *could also have had been* (pardon my grammatically erroneous time and dysfunctional subjunctive)? Or as someone who was, in Germany, in the *old* Federal Republic of Germany, “also Spanish,” “although Spanish,” and so on, and so forth? You understand? Of course you understand. You know the picture: One speaks always of the two sides of a medal, yet rarely of its edge. But I don't wish to lose myself in linguistic anecdotes and remembrances. Although that would in some ways be more cheerful, but unfortunately also much too superficial. And so will I roughly conclude therewith my love of quotations and their *aficionado* (in this case, myself) in a

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<sup>1</sup> Sartorius, Joachim. *Keiner gefriert anders*. Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Köln: 1996. Print.

provisionally held word-synthesis of two short sentences which mean margin. One with myself in progression: “I do observe. I am a no:mad-Andalusian.” Yes, this pleases me the most.

## “If I should die ...”

### 1 Draft. 1 Tragedy

In the summer when I sleep before the open window, when the night is long and I allow myself that purported luxury of the freelancer and rest longer than is customary—because the stream of writing requires the stillness of the lonelier hours and the word itself must be respected—sometimes from the street below I hear several old familiar voices. Three men who I have known from childhood, men who became part of my very world. From the time I could walk I learned to make a cool (not necessarily cold) differentiation between the strange and distant shadow icons of olive trees and the riddle-gnarled silhouettes of winter Black Forest firs. Even when this difference, at times, grew heated.

These men were the last—for us, their children—of that seemingly impossibly conspired community who had slowly transformed *my* Hausach into an Andalusian Black Forest village.

And so beneath my window, almost daily, a southern-sounding, Mediterranean banter, a word-skirmish whose sound composition and staccato rhythm is fashioned from its leisurely gait or by an unexpected stop of quiet footfall. Three men on the go. The one, a Don Antonio, passionately extolling once more his savings in the *Caja de Ahorros* or the *Libreta de Emigrantes*—auspicious penny bank of Spanish persuasion and its “savings account for emigrants.” I can almost hear his effusive gesticulations. A crescendo mutating into visual form. With a voice of sharpened-potency, rending the morning air. An almost razor-sharp, tremulous high tenor. Then the other, for whom these unparalleled admonitions applied by virtue of his own financial assets. He, too, a Don Antonio. Such coincidence. A second of the same name who with no less expression pits himself against the first, demanding to know why this Don Antonio continues to perpetrate the same blasted mistake: believing in Spain. Cherishing this country. To cling so tightly to a Spain that he would one day nevertheless have had to abandon, still consumed with the illusion that he would someday return. “„¡Y eso a tu edad!” *And this at your age!* A hallowed guest-worker age: 80 years. Albeit the second—you assume correctly—had already exceeded *his* 80<sup>th</sup> year and naturally already lost everything in life. Everything but his children, and of course, his savings account. And then the third, imagine, you will hardly believe it: correct, another Don Antonio—admittedly not one originating from Málaga, but from a small provincial city close to Barcelona. The third becoming—ritual must be maintained—every bit as unshakably emphatic in his preparation for a round of powerful arbitration between the two younger Don Antonios. A decidedly friendly mediation. The third in the confederation—this might in some way help to explain his impetus in impeding the escalation of things—was staunchly approaching his eighty-fifth year. One plausible cause for his serenity.

While the second Don Antonio projected his more muffled, smoky, bass-monotone across the morning landscape in answer to the angular shrill of the first, there was a

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thoroughly fumble-airy alto, a shyer wounded tenderness—not ungentle—to be observed in the voice of the third.

Whenever I am pulled from sleep in this way by the *antonisque* summer-street-alarm I ask myself which of these three attitudes regarding Spain and savings banks my father would have held. For he most certainly would have been the fourth member of this alliance of early-morning guest walkers, though his name was neither Antonio, nor did he possess (nor would he have possessed) a robust savings account with emigrant benefits. The fantasy suffices—that the fourth contender to these three Spanish disputants could have been my father—and I am overcome *stante pede* by sadness. A moment's mourning of vague solitude. A yearning for those long discarded days. Beauty with all its contradictions. Gone and yet still present. Gone.

In Hausach in the Black Forest, I would like to remind you—I doubt that I will ever grow tired of recalling this forgotten number from our local history—in *Hausach im Schwarzwald* there were once thirty families, all of whom (excepting perhaps two or three) came from Andalusia. Today the majority of these “immigrated” Spanish guest workers have either returned to their land of birth, live there now in their remembrances—despite tempered lapses of memory—and from their retirement pensions. Or they have—either here or there—passed on. Only a few still dream-commute between that which was home and that which home became. Never home is. A homeland old and homeland new, and in somewhere a somehow. On through that someone and sometime of illusions.

There is no real word which could describe the circumstance of transience, the passage of time. Even the image of the *passage of time* is too banal. A memento at best. Represented by invisible coffins. A nothing that dissolves what could have been solace. Children remain. Children's children, great-grandchildren. I'll say no more.

## Memento

Cuando yo me muera,  
enterradme con mi guitarra  
bajo la arena.

Cuando yo me muera,  
entre los naranjos  
y la hierbabuena.

Cuando yo me muera,  
enterradme, si queréis,  
en una veleta.

¡Cuando yo me muera!

- Federico García Lorca, “Memento”

“Memento”

If I should die,  
bury me beneath the sand  
with my guitar.

If I should die  
between the spearmint  
and the orange trees.

If I should die,  
bury me, if you will,  
upon a weathervane.

If I should die!

My first encounter with Federico García Lorca was tender. A sad tenderness. A slow, melancholy, ever-closer approach—pause worthy—to the Spanish word “anhelo.” A word which I would translate with *breath of longing*. Yet the primeval sound harbors in it that final corpo:real expulsion of air. Desirous to the last intake of breath. The passion of defeat rescinded in the sigh of grief. In Spanish, a surrogate mother. Languishing Lady Death. Lusting for life, she proclaims affinity to you.

It was mother who—with *her*, the Lady Death, and with the doomed poet Lorca—accomplished our disengagement into the privacy of listening. She sang the lullaby of both adversaries, the *nana*<sup>2</sup> which the poet had unearthed in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century at the behest of *granaíno*<sup>3</sup> composer Manuel de Falla. She sang the lifedeathstyles which were both mother and child. Like many of his songs, they did not shy away from death, garnering through it, instead, the living glory<sup>4</sup> of the world. Surely as well because they carry within themselves the universality of Andalusia. Today: carried. At least for me. Not much of it has remained. From that much lauded symbiosis of cultures. From that which melted orient and occident together in a minor key. Some even speak of their synthesis. 1 Córdoba. Not major key, but minor. Mourning—so I suspect—binds together peoples more closely than the pleasure elicited from any celebration of victory.

Later I encountered Lorca in Lorca.<sup>5</sup> On one of our parents’ many endless, migratory journeys home which in the beginning of the sixties of another century were not always a financial possibility, though they would soon—with my parents’ increasing prosperity—occur each and every summer, catapulting us for six weeks out of our imagination and into the reality of fantasy. Fiction as tidal pair. And we, stranded.

As a child I thought that Lorca the city was named after Lorca the poet. But I had deluded myself. In the same way, I should not—in the reading of my first novel—have relied upon the book cover alone. A novel I had consumed without once loosening it from my grasp: *The Drifters* (or in German *Die Kinder von Torremolinos*). The paperback I had discovered as a twelve year old in the shop window of a bookstore and had had that very instant to make mine. The promising title planted itself with great expectations in my mind. At least according to my own special logic which, with terrific resilience, had long

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<sup>2</sup> Spanish: lullaby (also a term of endearment for a grandmother).

<sup>3</sup> A man from Granada: In the German, *Granaíner* is a combination of the Spanish “granaíno” and the German masculine ending “-er.”

<sup>4</sup> German: *Lebensruhm* a linguistic creation of the author’s own device, it is reminiscent of the infamous German *Lebensraum*, a Nationalist term denoting the living space demanded for a people’s proliferation.

<sup>5</sup> Lorca: Federico del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús García Lorca (1898-1936), Andalusian poet and outspoken supporter of Spanish socialism, assassinated during the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Lorca: a city in the *Región de Murcia* in southeastern Spain.

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anchored my confused heart to childhood—even still on the eve of that thrilling departure into tumultuous adolescence. It seemed logical and clear as day to me. If a book speaks of *the* children from Torremolinos, then certainly Father must play a role. After all, he was born in Torremolinos. The title wasn't *A Couple Children from Torremolinos*, but *Die Kinder von Torremolinos—The Children from Torremolinos*. I read and read. Page after page on the lookout for his first and last names. I looked for all his names, and for the life of me I couldn't find him. There was nothing doing. Nothing to read into. Not even the slightest trace of him.

When I had read the last sentence—what is read—when I had devoured the last sentence, a literary-critical Big Bang erupted from me. I cursed James A. Michener like a sailor and remained thoroughly malcontent. I wanted (for a long time) to know nothing of his further publications. He had utterly disappointed both me and my imagination. All lies and betrayal! In retrospect, this experience helped me to follow not only my own imagined thread of fantasy, but rather the entire web of truth in my meandering and poeticizing between fiction and reality.

Father had little interest in Lorca. Literature was not really his thing. Nevertheless, in him, I experienced—lifelong—a passionate *fabulant*; stories unwound him. Most often, he spoke of his childhood in Málaga. Of course in verbal leaps of unpredictability and joy out of his early years. Not from them. Out of them. Pure pubescent summersaults. Even in hindsight. He positively rolled out from his stories. “We moved early on from Torremolinos to Málaga, immediately after the Civil War. To the capital of the *Costa del Sol*. We lived there in an old gatehouse. Your grandmother, your uncle, and I.”

A few weeks before his death, Father said once, “The only mistake I made in life was believing that I would stay young forever.”

That was his sentiment. Said at a time in which I could not yet imagine age. Old age and becoming old were, if at all, something I associated with my grandparents. Not with Father or Mother. As alive, so bursting with energy and adventure as his stories always were, he told us children early on (and not just once):

“If I should die, bury me there where a flower still grows from the most barren earth!”

That summer which saw his death and about which I would now like to speak smelled of camellias and looked like cypress trees. A summer which lagged. Night-craving. Dragged along. Like a person without language, but in images. A drowning summer. Pulled under of its own accord. The abruptness of agedness, which gathered distant bodies. Drew them home. And the close, the dead, the living bodies. Our own. It was August. A Father-August. Since then death carries the parting-gravity of the July harvest.<sup>6</sup> “augustabsorbs 1 dying” I once wrote, and the lines: “sweep back word upon word / and trust the ending.” Preempted 1 Old 1 Is. Between them 1 naked Have. Thereafter subjunctive and all subjunctives. 1 lonely Would Have, a naked “What-Would-Be-If.” Except that it, the eighth then—it was 1995, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of the month—would never again possess that shirtsleeve lightness. Not a game to lay upon we children's shoulders through those long summer nights; instead a dark shroud of final certainty which enveloped us. Death, the first indication of an arrival which signified farewell.

Father had done it. He had succeeded, for we, too, had arrived. For the first time in our lives he had bound us to Andalusia. What he had tried all his life to accomplish became, through his death, his magnum opus. His inheritance. His legacy.

<sup>6</sup> Here the author uses the archaic German *Heumonat* for July, literally: the month of hay.

Andalusia was no longer a seductive nostalgia, “el anhelo,” it was a dead body. The walls of a cemetery. A marble slab. A self-fulfilling aspiration called *muerte*. Lady Death. Bizarre.

As if forgotten, as if left behind, we stood there in the room around an open, air-conditioned casket, staring at a face beneath thick glass. We didn’t want to or perhaps we could not recognize him anymore. Father. There he lay. A stranger. In that so oft invoked homeland, Andalusia: 1 stranger. A stranger to us. The spectacle could not have been more cruel.

Our father’s death had gathered us together once more in Málaga, and I thought—to the extent that I was in anyway capable of thinking—“An old elephant. Like an old elephant he’d struck out alone to make his final peace. To return. Homeward. Back to the place where provenance was home.”

When we were children, we were told that an old elephant, sensing its impending death like an insatiable hunger, would leave the herd and seek out its preordained place of death alone. The herds moved on. And death remained behind. No one knew precisely where these elephant graveyards were located. Only they. That elephants possess a fascinatingly long memory, this I know to be true. Whether the myth that elephants choose their own graveyards is real, I am not sure. Nor do I care to learn. For me, the metaphor of return suffices. The parable of paternal solitude that has become for this “first generation”—in my free adaptation of Gertrude Stein, this *lost generation*—emblematic of life. Just as their “permits of residency” and “work visas,” their status as “guest workers” were not but allegory. Even today those stamps remain unfaded, the administrative language: punches on a time card.

Minutes before Mother had—we siblings had flown out from Frankfurt on the same day that we received word of his death, between hundreds of sun-starved tourists on one of those innumerable chartermachines—Mother had received us in Málaga on the steps of the city’s concrete churchyard, her arms filled with intangibility. Is there such thing as wilting strength in proximity? In those hours of her unguarded sorrow we could no longer differentiate between worlds, between times. As if all *tempi* were one. The collapsing construct of conceptual time. Its rhythms rent by tragedy and need.

The obituary we published later in both local Kinzigtäler newspapers read “He wanted to spend the holidays in his beloved Andalusia, and ended there instead the journey of his life. We mourn Francisco Agüera González who *inconceivably* to us all, passed on in Málaga on August 26, 1995. As he had wished, we buried him in his native soil. Hausach/Málaga, September 1995.”

Our mother arrived in Hausach in the Black Forest on November 1, 1960. Father had sent for her only after he had already begun to work several months before in a metal factory. To a country which should bring them future. Or at the very least, some small savings with which to build an existence back home in Málaga. In those days Europe was (as seen from Andalusia) a distant enchantment. At least five days’ journey past any reality. Trains to be changed like shifting landscapes. Or train stations whose names—when we heard them—were omens. Madrid Atocha, Paris—Gare de Lyon. Paris Gare de l’Est. Between and beyond them demoralizing waiting periods at two border crossings. Irún.<sup>7</sup> Kehl.<sup>8</sup> Spain was still many years away from Europe. Germany was closer. Not yet the

<sup>7</sup> Spanish border town on the Franco-Spanish border.

<sup>8</sup> German border town on the Franco-German border.



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Europe which we like to imagine today, although its very identity now, once more, is challenged.

Germany belonged for my parents to that promise of progress and freedom which only began beyond the Pyrenees. A renewed reality and fiction in one. Something not yet applicable to the chronology of Spain and to the dictatorship which so generously allowed them to follow the work north. There was reality. Naked reality. The empty pots still boiling over from the Civil War and its many ghosts who for almost forty years affirmed this spirit and cemented in my parents' hearts the bars before their mouths. What awaited them over the border was also only tale, illusion, dream. The journey from Málaga through Madrid, Irún to Paris, from the Gare de Lyon to the Gare de l'Est, onward to Strasbourg and then Kehl took days. More than days. Years. More than years: a lifetime.

A few years ago, when Mother celebrated her fiftieth year in Germany—a kind of golden anniversary with Germany—more than anything, the anecdotes held tryst. Father was missing. There was a newspaper article. People congratulated her. As one would congratulate the spa guests spending their 40th or 50th annual holiday in the same, tiny, picture-perfect Black Forest town.

On the following day, routine returned. But from then on, the rut only infrequently made itself known. As though one should regard waiting as something unusual. A small diversion. That some event should be held in the village for her. Birthdays, Christmas, Easter, Carnival.

Mother seemed to be integrated. Through us children. Through the grandchildren. Everyone knows and loves her. Only sometimes she is alone. In her house. But not at home.

She is not a member of any club. Takes part in no fitness group. She doesn't go to swimming events for those in their so-called "Golden Years." She is also not a charity case. There are programs for such people. I read somewhere, "Migration and Illness in Old Age." But I nowhere found a program with the title "Migration and No Illness in Old Age." Or to say it differently: "Migrant and still Healthy in Old Age." Forgive me the breath of unintentional irony, it is only humor. In the best sense of the word. For you know, humor is the most imaginative weapon of the oppressed.

I fear the day on whose morning I will sit beside my open window, hear the voices of the Antonios, and recognize that there are no longer three voices, but two. Then again a question must be asked whose answer can only be provided in the subjunctive. Somewhere between origin and home.

Not long ago Mother asked—as if incidentally—if I would think she were a bad wife—our parents were together for 44 years—if she, she asked, would be a bad wife in hindsight if she did not want to be buried alongside my father in Andalusia, but rather here in Germany, close to her children and grandchildren...?

Upon my father's modest gravestone in the cemetery in Málaga there stands in silver letters:

Francisco Agüera González

Hausach – Málaga – Hausach

A death

is a death

is a death

is a death

no death is

like any other.

In German alone. I wanted someday that his children's children...

Si muero, dejad el balcón abierto.

El niño come naranjas.

(Desde mi balcón lo veo.)

El segador siega el trigo.

(Desde mi balcón lo siento.)

¡ Si muero,

dejad el balcón abierto!

- Federico García Lorca "Despedida"

"Departure"

If I die, leave open the balcony door.

The child eating oranges.

(I see this from my balcony.)

The reaper shearing grain.

(I feel this from my balcony)

If I die,

leave open my balcony door!