

**RENÉE  
FERRER**

**THE KNOTS  
OF  
SILENCE**

TRANSLATION  
BY  
**BETSY PARTYKA**

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OF THE SOUTH**

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Renée Ferrer.

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*To my mother, whose encouragement and support never waive.*

*And for my children, Jacque, Julie and Alec, who have begun to experience the immense joys associated with travel and literature.*

*Betsy*

*Al compañero de toda mi vida, por su apoyo en este andar detrás de las palabras,*

*a mis hijos por compartirme con la literatura*

*a mis nietos por la alegría de tenerlos*

*con inmenso amor*

*Mi agradecimiento para Betsy Partyka  
por su incansable labor en favor de la literatura paraguaya,  
las horas dedicadas a mi obra  
y la amistad que nos une desde el momento dichoso del primer  
encuentro.*

*Renée*



## PREFACE

Renée Ferrer received her Ph.D. in History from the University of Asunción, and is now one of the most prolific and recognized writers in Paraguay. She began her literary career as a poet, and has since expanded her writing repertoire to include short fiction, novels, plays, children's literature, and historic essays. The versatility of her writing extends from classically written short stories to fairy tales, from eco-literature to mythological tales. She explores feminism and femininity, power and repression, the desired and the disdained, truth and lies.

Among the many literary organizations to which she contributes regularly, Ferrer is a member of the PEN Club of Paraguay, the Association of Children's Literature in Paraguay, and the Society of Paraguayan Writers. She has held executive positions in a number of writers' societies and is currently the President of the Paraguayan Academy of the Spanish Language. In 2003 she received the honor of "Knights of the Order of Fine Arts and Letters," awarded by the French Ministry of Culture and Communication.

In addition to many local and municipal literary prizes, Ferrer has received national prizes presented by "El Lector," "La República," and "Amigos del Arte." Internationally she received the Pola de Lena Prize in Asturias, Spain for her short story "La Seca," the UNESCO Prize at the International Book Fair in Buenos Aires for her book *Desde el encendido corazón del monte*, and the Naaman Literary Prize in Lebanon for her complete works. In 2010 she received the *Premio Municipal de Literatura* for her third novel *La Querida*. And most recently she received the *Premio Nacional de Literatura* for her collection of poems entitled *Las moradas del universe* (2011).

As a whole her work has been recognized internationally in Israel, Mexico, France, Spain and the United States. Many of her works have been translated into French, Italian, Albanian, German,

Swedish, Portuguese Arabic, Guaraní and English. Her voice is also recorded in the Library of Congress.

Her first novel, *Los nudos del silencio*, has been translated into Italian and French, and is now presented in English. This complex narrative of intrigue, memories, and suspense merits the attention of an active and perceptive audience that can piece together the variegated lines of thought shared by the protagonists of the novel. Three very different worlds come together under one roof in the sordid confines of a striptease joint in Paris. Poetic and vulgar voices mingle and diverge through the present and past as each character tries to come to terms with his or her own identity.

For the first time an English speaking audience will be able to enjoy the intricacies and nuances of *The Knots of Silence*. Undoubtedly, new readers to Ferrer's works will crave more. The future awaits the translation of her entire collection of literature into English.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Paris at last! Years hoping to make this trip - dreaming, then suddenly, it's happening: the opportunity is here, looking me right in the face. It tastes so rich on my tongue. Only three days, and already like a fish in water, Manuel's voice brags from the bed.

Just out of the shower, still prickling with the expectant joy of the unexpected, water droplets sliding down her shoulders and sides, she pauses languidly, the short towel wrapped around her. Slowly, uninhibited, she carries her seasoned youth from one side of the room to the other. She listens distractedly to him, while he, meticulously and avidly, studies the network of the metro, anticipating delight from the spectacle they will see tonight. Where? A variety theater? No. A café concert? No. Where then? A little theater where feelings reserved for only a select few are served. Something like an erotic orchestra, let's say. But Manuel, how could you think I'd want to see a thing like that! Why not? We're in Paris, my love. In Paris! Just think. The city where pleasure grows like mushrooms. You're talking like some vulgar tourist. Isn't that what we are? There are so many things to see in Paris without going to something like that. So tell me, what's so awful about seeing naked people on stage? Are you intimidated or too sensitive? No, I'm not intimidated at all. It's just that I don't appreciate a spectacle of that class. Well, I love women, what do you want me to say, and the more there is to see, the better. Yes, yes, I know. But, perhaps it is more exciting for a man to see a woman nonchalantly unwrap her voluptuousness, and give herself sip by sip to whet the appetite, than to have twenty ladies stripped

from the waist up, walking up and down the runway with their ripped hose, as if their bodies were no longer important to them, or even a part of them? Don't talk to me about highfalutin subtleties. Here you're going to see much more than a parade, I assure you, and not in great quantities, but one by one, just the way you like it. Don't be sarcastic, Manuel, please. So there's no more to talk about. We're going and that's that. Look, we get on the metro right here, and in twenty minutes we're... unless you prefer a taxi, we can afford the expense. We're here to spend money, you know. That's why "hup, two," all business, every time they need me. You don't think they drag me out of bed in the middle of the night with no reward, do you? I just don't want to go, Manuel. I don't want to! How can you think I'd like to see a live sex act, with lights and music! What do you think? They're going to charge you to watch it on video? Of course they show their bodies. That's what it's all about. It's not me, Manuel, listen to me. It's so intimate and foreign, so... a man and a woman suspended only by their panting, showing everything to whomever wants to gather the fruit. And we, in front, watching the ups and downs of desire, borrowed or true, I don't know. How can they ignore the spectators, I wonder. Just a matter of practice, my dear. We're in Paris! Even so, I don't like it. Let's go somewhere else, alright? Please. You promised you'd do what I want during this trip, so I would forget about the piano, your being away all the time, the rumors and everything else. Look, here, in the guidebook, there's a concert in... Quit screwing around. What! Come to Paris and not go to a joint like this because the little girl is disgusted. Give me a break. You're not a child sucking at the tit, Malena. I just can't, Manuel. Don't you understand? I don't want to go. But I do. And I promise you I'm not going to miss out because of your scruples. So if you don't want to go, you can stay in the hotel by yourself, now get ready and let's go.

Manuel's words slapped the air in the room, shamelessly spewing little blobs of spit. Conditioned reflex to a learned signal: resilient resistance backs off, recedes, dripping through the crevices of clenched fists – two rocks of sedimentary protest that crack on the counter.

But it is all useless. He knows very well that she will not try to back out – her skin has the malleable odor of clay. Faded



indignation sidles across the paths of conscience, finding a place to rest. It shrinks, pulls back, recedes, shapeless and irritating. Like an unswallowable mouthful that sticks to the pallet and tongue, between revulsion and indecision, a mass of rage and silence. Suddenly, without warning, a bit of rebellion rises to her cheeks, making it difficult for her husband to continue his plans, but she knows that the battle is lost.

Confrontations always disarmed her – disarm her, will disarm her – as if they were serpents with eyes ready to draw her into a trance. Suddenly, she feels her body breaking apart, a ripping sensation that comes from who knows where, but persists deep down and dwells in her, like a pebble stuck in your shoe. Her eyes float over here, the aquiline smile over there, her hands held tightly together are even farther away, and, lying in some unnamed wasteland, her tumultuous heart. She is no more than a dismembered living being, an irreconcilable kaleidoscope of scattered body parts that go their own separate way seeking escape. As usual.

Nervous and quiet, she slips away to the closet to hide her flushed face between the open doors. Insistently, she looks for something, not knowing what. While on her way to the bathroom she runs into a tear, then shuts herself in to wait until self-respect settles in (an indispensable requisite of harmony), so she can present herself later, perfumed, dressed, and ready to go out. I am ready whenever you are, she tells him, though behind her fragrance the very same voice eats away at her: If you don't like it you can leave; no one is forcing you to stay with me; the doors are open. The doors have always been open, only the habit of hiding behind steel bars of silence closes them.

The metro took us straight to Rue Pigalle. We walked a bit, pale under the few dim street lamps, entrenched in silence, knowing our thoughts flowed askance. We moved forward like strangers riding together in the same car, ignoring the secret movements in the isolated street. From inside a bar they watched us with boredom. Then right there, to the side, was the entryway: small and insignificant if you removed the faded blue cardboard decorations stuck to the thin door frame so long ago.

To prove there was no doubt as to the nature of this place, the ticket booth lay abandoned, letting you enter with a premeditated and conspiratorial reserve, enhancing the wallows of shame. A weak, tired light watched us from its bare bulb with the shrewdness of an old lady, framing our silhouettes in the entry hall, almost conscious that those who entered would lower their heads to conceal their secret discomfort, then slide the curtain aside, and blend into the room as quickly as possible.

Its small size was surprising: three rows of seats grouped by fives and another four against the wall – that was the total capacity of the room. The show had already begun with the tiny theater only half full: single men openly chewing on lechery and lust, and the couple that left immediately, as if chased away by embarrassment. Wasn't this place the front room of a low-class brothel? Why did she think of that just then? Who knows? But the idea remained like a filament of light on her brow. Shrouded as they were in that fetid artificial fog, she felt strange, as if she had been forced into the wrong place. Manuel and her in a brothel! She and Manuel in a brothel? Is it true? A cold tongue takes form and runs down her spine; zigzagging up and down; her muscles go weak as if turned to water, with a chill that reaches the tips of her fingers, throbbing in her pulse – in a brothel. In a brothel. In a brothel.

The phrase crosses her mind, riddled with fear, confusion, impending indecision whether to flee. If she managed to flee this place right now, maybe what is to come, although she does not know what that is, could be postponed or delayed, or simply be a dream within a dream. But how could she evade time while it imprisoned her, coiling its way around her? The anxiety of a criminal caught red-handed hovered over her, not knowing where

to settle. It was like wearing a patch, a sign between your legs and trying to make sure it is not noticed. Wanting to erase your face so no one will see it. Although, of course, who knows me in Paris?

I know me in Paris!

The air in the room had a faded blue tone, something between wary and disillusioned, like the entry sign she had seen with the name of the place in big letters: “*La Rose Bleue*.” And beside the door, a little further in, the face of a woman called Mei Li, cut out of thick cardboard.

A sax pulled the long complaints of a melody from its metallic innards. With painful persistence it kept yanking them out. Raking through the notes as if it were raping them, and raping her too, breaking her – unrestrained pleasure – underneath those penetrating voices, low and maddeningly deep.

The music becomes flesh against flesh, trembling, agonizing and exhilarating, igniting the pulse in the blue branches of her veins. It lives in her, penetrates and possesses her, because she never really quit being a musician despite agreeing to leave the conservatory, the advanced course, the concert tour. Everything was always a whirlwind of sounds, parallel to the movements of her body, to the uncountable ups and downs of her heart. Her whole being was music, until her knuckles turned to knots, one by one, leaving her hands condemned. If you want to marry me you’d better think about closing that piano lid, because I don’t like that sort of thing. Only, at that moment, she did not imagine the price you pay when the source dries up.

Enveloped by the notes that push and pull, tiny, in the center of the shifting light, an Asian woman dances on the stage.

As soon as you entered I saw you, with your reed-thin waist emerging from your full green linen skirt, and that blouse, pure silk, indifferent and loose just beneath your white alabaster throat. It is obvious you have been dragged here by some mysterious rope, your steps follow without question or resistance. You do not dare sit in the first row of seats, so close to me that you could touch me, and you pretend not to see me. Even now that you are inside, with the curtain open to the concrete evidence of my body, you pretend. You sit as if asking permission, as if your permanent attitude were an apology, and your very being an irresolute excuse. Better to stay discretely behind. So nobody will see you. So your presence goes unheeded. But even though you hide behind your eyelids, how uncomfortable you are in a place like this. You cannot hide the loose threads of resentment that dangle from under that careful aloof attitude you wear.

Shaded by the blue shadows, Malena appears grateful for the bit of semi-obscurity - anonymous - no one knows me - therefore I don't exist - that covers her and immerses her in the illusion of not really being there, of not being her, of being someone else with her face and skin, but not her, the one who lets herself be pushed and pulled on the periphery of life, always skirting her own needs.

Something tells me she is not in control of herself, or of the structure that supports her. Were there so many women pinned to the wheel of my existence that when I look at you I slip right into you, searching for your most intimate secrets that protect the fissures in your soul? I see your needs struggling, rebelling, succumbing, ceding, finally, to the illusion of not existing. Deceit

and opium paradoxically are synonyms in the dictionary of human conduct. Both keep us from accessing our inner reservoir, forcing us into avoidance. I feel you are drowning in deceit, like my uncle in the hallucinations of opium, each time he loses our food ration with the cast of the die. And even before. When he plays with luck, knowing he has nothing to pay with, and that the third player in the game is she, Lady Luck. His fever for chance follows me. It worries my mornings, wound up like skeins of time, the lonely days of my childhood, as submission follows you, obvious even in the conspiratorial way you take his arm. It is that docility they have dressed you in that unleashes in me the coil of indignation that wants nothing more than to taint you.

In the dance hall you can almost feel their breathing, waiting for my act. And in the painful brass suspense and the increasing heat, your heart accelerates, buckling under the hoarse voice of the sax. You stir; you are suffocating, about to explode, you hold back. Calm adjusts, settles in like a convenient cover over the turbulence. Thankfully. Because one must control one's self. Honestly, married women must never lose control.

Pleading with her lungs, where air is trying to squeeze past something overwhelming and persistent, her breathing is ragged. Stained with shame, thickened, her breathing leaps. They have stained you with such resignation hanging from your neck, your hands, your tongue, all of you. I do not understand how I can penetrate your silence. This knowledge comes from an unexpected clairvoyance. I do not know how I know it, maybe like the way one just knows certain things: by simple eye contact.