

WITHOUT A COMPASS

by LUISA CARNÉS

*Translated from the Spanish by* CATHERINE NELSON

For those women, huddled in the small boat leaving the docks of Santander, the sea was life.

They couldn't see it, but they sensed it beneath the rotten boards, they smelled its familiar breath.

They had boarded as night fell around them. Not a single star illuminated the sad farewell; the darkness was absolute. Muffled voices, as if prematurely drowned. The water felt rougher than usual, and the boat struggled over the waves. Without moonlight, lantern, or the twin shafts of light glimmering from the distant lighthouse, the ship and its cargo were a shadow on the back of the inhospitable sea.

To the untrained eye, nothing was visible. One would need the piercing gaze of the old sailor piloting the boat to make out anything. Only his eyes saw through the blackness of the sea and could make out the dark shapes of the women and children who had been entrusted to him only hours before. There were more than twenty, piled on top of each other in the cargo ship where he normally had a crew. But

now, the ship was running without its oil lamps, and there were no masculine voices carried on the wind. The muted goodbyes and whispers had died out, and only the crying of a child accompanied the hoarse breath of the motor helmed by the old man.

He was the oldest in the union. His beard was white and long and had gone years without shaving. Not one of the women had even noticed him. Not one of the refugees knew what boat they were on, what name was emblazoned on its side, nor who was behind the helm as it sliced through the black waves. Husbands and fathers had brought them hours before, a bundle of clothes clutched in their hands, a word—perhaps the last—on their lips, and choked-back sighs.

As night fell, the old man had watched them arrive at the harbor.

Women and children boarded; the men remained on land.

A woman cried out: “Papa! Come with us! . . . You’re too old to fight!”

The old sailor’s orders from his comrades were clear: deliver the cargo to a French port.

The other sailors chose him because he was the oldest. They gave him a small cargo boat, powered by a decrepit engine that shuddered with an ominous, deathly rattle. And that very night, the ship left the coast of Spain with its load, leaving Santander behind, shrouded in darkness.

For those women, the sea was life. Yet leaving their city, even with its promise only of death, filled them with pain.

They were not only thinking of a strip of land and houses. They were remembering their homes, their school, their father's or husband's shop, the fresh water in the well, the old armoire that had been in the family for generations, the bed in which lives had been brought forth, and in which others had been brought to an end. It wasn't just the barricades where the living took their stand, or the cemetery that protected the dead. It was something much deeper and more visceral that remained behind and that they now searched for in the shadows, eyes opened wide, glassy from tears.

Children had fallen asleep on mothers' skirts and atop soft bundles.

Yet there was one boy whose eyes remained open. About eight years old, he was the only one who hadn't joined in the chorus of tears. He was also the only one who noticed the old man piloting the vessel. As the boat headed out to sea, the boy moved toward him, picking his way through the bodies of strangers crammed into the small space. He was alone. Like the others, a refugee, no different than the rest. But at that moment, no one paid him any attention. The wind buffeted his small frame, and he had to wrap his arms tightly around his little bundle of clothes to protect it from its attacks.

Like the women, he once had a world of his own. It was a world made up of a small, one-door house that smelled of bleach when the cleaning woman scrubbed the wooden table once a week. There was always bread and cheese in the cupboard, and sometimes apples. In the winter, the woman

lit the brazier under the table, and at night his father scattered lavender over the embers. His mother had died before his second birthday and his father had not remarried. They had no relatives. His father clothed him and didn't scold him when he lost a schoolbook or when a toe poked out of a worn shoe—which for some reason was always the right one. Now his father remained at the union headquarters, but he had promised his son they would soon see each other again, somewhere. He had wrapped his son's clothes and textbooks in a towel, taken him to the dock, and spoken to one of the women getting on the boat: "Keep an eye on him, please. He's all alone." The woman had said yes, she would take care of him, but later the boy didn't know which woman his father had entrusted him to. They all looked the same. Few could contain their tears. But this did not prevent them from securing a place on the deck to make their children and themselves as comfortable as possible. They were nothing more than dark shapes tripping over each other in the blackness. It took a long time for some of the shapes to stop weeping.

His father didn't cry, he gave his son a big kiss and clapped him on the back of his neck, saying: "That's it, little man, be brave!" Later, as the ship moved away from the dock, among the chorus of voices, he heard his father's: "Take care of yourself, Benny!"

In addition to the little one-door house in the world he was leaving behind, there was an orchard where Benny played every afternoon with his friends. It had a waterwheel

turned by a donkey. It made him sad to see the little donkey go round and round in circles all day long, his eyes covered, to the sound of water filling the metal buckets. Poor little donkey. Once Benny took the rag off his eyes. The animal spooked and the owner chased him out of the orchard, launching rocks at him with a slingshot he always carried in his belt. But the rocks never hit their target, and Benny kept going to the orchard with his friends. What would happen to the poor animal if the war reached Santander?

When the shapes finally settled down Benny felt even more alone. There was no place for him in this little world. The women and their children had filled the cramped space, one next to the other, packed on top of each other like sardines. There was no room for his little body, trembling from cold and shock. He no longer thought about the donkey, the orchard, or its owner. He was now keenly aware of his abandonment. Not knowing what prompted him, he turned toward the prow, headed toward the old sailor—whom no one else paid any attention to either—and huddled next to his feet. There, the smell of tar and dried salt emanating from the deck was powerful. He stared for a long time at the starless sky.

No one noticed the little lump that Benny formed at the feet of the old man, whose presence was also ignored. The boy had fallen asleep, his arms wrapped around himself, perhaps to protect himself from the cold or from loneliness.

The refugees' sighs had been replaced by tears, their hearts melded with those they held closest, and they dozed, rocked by pain.

Among those fleeing the war, the old sailor was the only one awake. Alert, his sensitive hands gripped the wheel.

Even without moon or stars to aid him, the old man could see. He was made for seeing through the darkness and now he was looking at the small lump at his feet. That trembling bundle of clothing whom no one knew. He could see Benny fighting against the damp cold that invaded the boat.

Keeping his right hand on the helm, with his left he unwound the scarf from his neck and spread it over the boy.

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The early morning light turned the odd collection of passengers an ashen gray. The shapes within the dark palette began to stir. Sometimes arms shifted, or heads flopped to one side, then returned to their original position, or leaned on shoulders pressed against theirs. After hours of anguish, each one had sunk into her own little space, brooding over her hardships or surrendering to sleep. Those who weren't sleeping watched the black water slowly turn gray under the leaden sky. Their eyes passed indifferently over their traveling companions. That picture of abandonment with heads

slumped on shoulders and bodies propped on bodies, rocking on the sea, had no effect on them.

The water took on a purple hue, sparkling as it came to life.

Some women opened their eyes to the light. They pulled their coats tighter around them and adjusted blankets around their sleeping children. Others tamed unruly hair, searched in their sacks for food, and ate in silence, without looking at their neighbor.

The light began to outline shapes in that indistinct mass of humanity, revealing eyes and mouths in the washed-out flesh. From the shapeless pile, worried glances turned toward the horizon. For some, eyelids drooped and closed again, as they stubbornly returned to the obliviousness of sleep. Others stared at the still water, as if they were far removed from the drama of the small ship and its cargo.

Suddenly one of the women bolted upright. Flinging her right arm out and pointing, she cried: "We're heading back! We're going back to Santander!"

Her shout caused the pile of bodies to stir.

"We're still in the bay!" another exclaimed.

"All night on board and we haven't even left Santander . . ." said a third.

They were frightened. The strangers looked at each other's faces, without seeing a single one.

"That can't be!"

"How are we still in the bay?"

Some shook sleeping children and stood up. Every eye turned toward the prow, to the back of the man at the helm, the only man on board. The faint light prevented them from seeing him, but it was the pilot. It had to be him.

One of the women stood up and addressed the others, shouting: "They handed us over to a fascist! He's taking us back!"

"Are we going to let him take us back to Spain?"

"It can't be true!"

Other women joined in.

"After all we sacrificed to leave!"

Now several women had risen and advanced toward the helm.

"Where are you taking us?"

"Why did you turn back?"

"Why are we still here? Answer us!"

For the first time they saw the age of the man they were rebuking. Up close they could see his small frame and weather-beaten face. White locks escaped from under his beret.

"Why are we still here?"

"Calm down, please . . ."

"Why are we going so slowly? Answer us!"

"The motor is tired, that's all. Go back to your places."

"I don't believe you."

"Me neither."

"What do you mean 'The motor is tired!' . . . What kind of explanation is that?"

"I said, go back to your places. On this boat I'm in charge."

Some women toward the back moved away, grumbling. Those congregated in front turned and followed them.

Benny, now awake, asked the old man: "Is it true, Abuelo? Are we going back to Santander?"

"Going back? . . . Don't listen to those gossip women. You and I are the only men on this boat. We'll have to take charge of them, won't we?"

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The old sailor had a secret. A secret that, if discovered by the mass of bodies piled up in the vessel, would have caused them to burst out in shouts and prayers. They were sailing without a compass. That was his secret. The boat was adrift with its load of refugees and there was little the pilot could do to direct it toward a French port as he had been ordered. The sea was in charge, and the keel cut restless paths through the water.

The old sailor had been around boats from a very early age. In his childhood home, which had smelled as much like pitch as any old felucca in the harbor, there was a little green sailboat boasting the name of his maternal grandmother that, from its place on the wall over the kitchen table, presided over family life. Since that time, he had always known the smell of engine fuel and salt. His life as a sailor began

on a fishing boat, the *Theresa*, and then moved to maritime transport, carrying goods from Santander to southern Spain. He always enjoyed taking the helm, making his way gently toward the horizon, guided by the ship's compass, a sailor's best friend. Never before had the compass been his enemy, with its needles paralyzed and dead. And just when it wasn't crates of machinery being carried in this small tub of wood and iron.

Shortly after leaving the dock he'd realized the compass wasn't working and was tempted to turn back. But the gravity of the situation stopped him. As they left, Franco's troops were advancing on the edge of town. He couldn't go back. He couldn't return this anxious cargo to the union men who'd trusted him. Very slowly he continued on, hoping in vain that through the overcast sky the starry paths would open up to guide him.

With the first light of dawn he could see they were still near the port. They had been on the water all night without even leaving behind the coastline. The women's fears were justified. Yet it wasn't the old sailor's skill they doubted, but his loyalty to the town. That's what hurt.

He knew he had no words to assure those poor women, so he chose to remain silent. He couldn't tell them the truth. He couldn't tell them he was navigating without a compass.

Sometime that morning they finally lost sight of the Spanish coast. The old sailor no longer felt the daggers in his back. As the distance between the boat and Spain

grew, the women's fear seemed to abate. Some nursed babies. Others looked among their things for a little food to divide among their children, carefully reserving some for later, for another moment during this trip of unknown duration. Mothers attempted to tidy up young ones. Those without combs licked their fingers to smooth down hair.

The first day they were talkative. When extremities began to go numb, they would walk in the narrow open spaces among the bodies. They discussed how long it would take to get from Santander to the coast of France, in which port they might end up, and what would be waiting for them there.

Sometimes they would be surprised to find that a traveling companion lived on their same street, two buildings up, or that she frequented the same shops. After twenty years in the same city, strangers were now united in the middle of the sea because of the war, on a journey whose end no one could predict.

As they talked, no one dared mention what was on everyone's mind: the men who had stayed to defend Santander. Is it possible the women thought they might find them waiting on the other side? Like they had only gone for a long walk? When they arrived safely in France, would the drama of the fascist uprising be over? Had they even completed the first part of their journey as refugees? Before them and behind them they were surrounded by the unending sea. Which way was France? Where was Spain?

As afternoon faded, tongues fell silent. The boat continued skimming over the water, stars now appearing above. Blankets were wrapped around bodies. Mothers and children melded into one. Some women tried to sleep, convinced it would help shorten the journey. Others talked within their own circles in low voices, confiding fears they hadn't dared speak of in the light of day.

No one had looked at the sailor again. They never considered whether he had any food. No thought was given to who would pilot the vessel when his old limbs grew stiff from fatigue. They left him to pilot the boat, oblivious to anything other than their own desire to get far away from their home. For them, the old sailor was nothing more than a blue-striped shirt that disappeared at dusk and reappeared at dawn.

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On the second day the old sailor addressed the women nearest him: "This boy is sick and he's all alone."

He was pointing to Benny, shivering under his scarf.

The moon was shining, yet the women who approached the pilot and the small bundle huddled at his feet could see only a dark, shapeless, and featureless form.

Someone touched his forehead and exclaimed: "He's burning up!"

Another woman kneeling next to the little boy looked up and announced: "It's diphtheria. I know that rasp all too well: it took one of my sons."

The women, who had approached with children in their arms, drew back in terror.

The one kneeling by his side asked, "What do we do? We can't just let him die like some animal."

"All I have is bicarbonate," one of the passengers said.

The other women had retreated, the space between them and the sick boy growing wider.

"Isn't there an extra blanket somewhere?" asked the old man.

Hands quickly draped a blue quilt over the boy.

The mothers moved with their children to the back of the boat, their eyes never leaving the small heap, black in the moonlight, from which came the sick boy's death rattle. They moved as far away as possible, pressed up against the only barrier between them and the sea. They held their children tightly, eyes darting from the boy to the pilot.

One of them cried out: "Can't we go faster?"

As if the cry aroused fear in all of them, several women joined her:

"Are we ever going to get there?"

"I have no food left for my children."

"I've only got half a loaf."

"If it weren't bad enough already, now this . . ."

Once the old sailor was seen stepping away from his post for a moment to raise a shallow bowl of milk to the sick

boy's lips—no one knew where he had gotten it. He immediately returned to his place, hands gripping the helm, his eyes fixed on the horizon.

He was surrounded by mothers, tender-hearted mothers who embraced their children and lavished sweet words over them. He saw soft, maternal hands caressing little ones, peeling fruit, providing a piece of bread. But Benny was alone among so many mothers. The pained rasping that came from his open mouth and the heat emanating from his little body terrified them. The space between them and the sick boy had grown. Everyone tried to remove their children from the danger little Benny presented. They were fleeing war and hunger and now death stalked them in the form of this tiny frame covered by a blue quilt. The contagion threatened the little refugees. It frightened the mothers, making them more tender with their own little ones, but turning them hard against anyone they hadn't given birth to, and especially against that stranger who threatened their offspring with the death he carried inside. Because there was no way out. Death had come to the boat without a compass and now it was Benny's turn. All alone and listless, Benny slowly yielded to his misfortune.

The women, too, seemed to have given up in the face of this new affliction. Clutching their children, they searched the horizon anxiously for any smudge of color that would indicate the French coast. But in the distance, the sea and sky blended together, indifferent to their anguish.

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Food supplies diminished. Mothers rationed out increasingly smaller portions, and children cried for more food. Hunger dug into their small stomachs and kept them awake at night. In the dim moonlight their features were mostly invisible, but their eyes shone brighter and blacker.

The single women ate sparingly and in secret, as if consuming something that didn't belong to them. They seemed to feel the shame of not having to share while mothers divided up scraps of bread for their children. Some avoided eye contact while eating. They tucked pieces of cheese or meat into their dresses and concealed their bites from the children who looked at them so piteously.

Some of the women became suspicious and hateful. Need began to sow mistrust. Fear that the journey would be prolonged, that they would be overcome by hunger, made them selfish. They pretended not to have food, then hid in the toilet to wolf it down alone.

But even hunger couldn't push the sick boy out of their minds. The little pile of rags continued trembling before them, threatening them with his labored breathing.

"Why don't you put an end to it, Lord? Why doesn't it end?"

The evil desire consumed everyone's thoughts. You could see it in the glances directed toward the sick boy, the impatience in their faces as they looked at him.

“Why doesn’t it just end?”

They all tried to forget he existed. But the little rag heap was still there, the focus of everyone’s attention.

Including the old sailor’s. He had almost forgotten about the broken compass as he navigated by the stars. His thoughts remained centered on the boy. Benny, whom no one paid any attention to a few hours ago, now united all the women in one anxious mass. Every one of those maternal hearts was pierced by the same terror. The old pilot knew these women well. He had had enough of seeing them sewing and nursing their babies by their front doors, bosoms covered with a handkerchief. He knew their hands, hardened from domestic work, softened when spreading a sheet over a bed and became softer still when stroking downy heads. But all of them, whose hearts overflowed with tenderness, now harbored murderous thoughts. They all wanted Benny to die soon. As long as the boy lived, with his breathing louder than the roar of the sea, he threatened the life of their own children. There was nothing to be done for him. If he wasn’t going to live, the least he could do was die now, and allow the others to live. They didn’t say it, but they thought it. You could see it in their eyes, in their movements, in the way they held their children. They resented each shallow breath he labored for, as if he were stealing it from the other children, as if there weren’t enough oxygen for everyone.

It had been some time since the old man offered his bowl of milk to the boy. The boy's little throat had closed up completely, his lungs barely allowing him a breath of life.

The man in the striped shirt had lived many years and he had fought countless battles with the sea. But never had human nature been laid so bare as on this voyage toward hope. In moments of danger, he saw men help each other, sharing water when it was scarce, sometimes risking their lives for each other. But none of these women overflowing with love for their children lifted a single finger to help Benny, the boy dying alone. None of those women who nursed their children offered the warmth of her bosom to the dying refugee. Over the last several hours, the boy's dry lips had not been wetted by anything other than the clay bowl offered by the old sailor.

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So he was surprised by the woman's gesture. She must have been one of the single women who furtively ate her dry crust of bread with her back turned to the others or in the cramped toilet. Suddenly detaching herself from the group, in which weariness and desperation had erased all appearance of humanity, she approached Benny.

The five prolonged days at sea were apparent from her clothes, limp hair, and overall drab appearance.

No longer was anyone asking when the boat would arrive at its destination nor when the sick boy's rasping would cease.

The vessel continued floating along with no indication that the old pilot was making any attempt to guide it to port. A tenuous light again brought forth the faded flock from the shadows and revealed the striped shirt of the old man shepherding them.

It was then that the woman approached Benny; no one attempted to stop her.

The old man saw her sit next to the boy and draw him into her lap.

The sun shone upon the scene: the woman and the boy.

Had her body ever been ripped apart giving life to another? Did she see in Benny the son she had perhaps always longed for? She was a lone woman for a lone boy. The woman without children for the boy without a mother. She didn't know his name. What she knew was that he was alone. And that to die alone is to die two times over.

The sun fully illuminated the scene of the woman and the boy. The woman's heart beating next to the boy's, now still.

A little later the coast of France appeared on the horizon.

They had been on the water for five days.

The eyes of the old man in the striped shirt remained fixed on the image of the single woman and the dead boy.

Their image grew larger, they had become as immense as the sea, as damp and salty as tears, as bitter as Spain's tragedy, blocking out the murderous looks of the tender-hearted mothers.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: On July 17, 1936 Spanish General Francisco Franco led a military coup against the democratically elected government. Failing to overthrow the Republic, the revolt stretched into a three-year civil war that proved to be a precursor and testing ground for the world war to come. The Spanish Republic was backed by the Soviet Union and the anti-fascist International Brigades, while Nazi Germany and fascist Italy provided the military support Franco needed, eventually resulting in his almost forty-year dictatorship.

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) triggered one of the largest refugee crises of the last century, with nearly half a million Spaniards fleeing to France, thousands of whom subsequently were forced into internment camps. "Without a Compass" (1956), by Spanish author Luisa Carnés (1905-1964), evokes the experience of refugees

on the northern front, crossing the Bay of Biscay from Santander and Cantabria to ports in France in 1937. That year, an estimated 30,000 refugees, most of them women and children, passed through Santander.<sup>i</sup> In total, more than 100,000 Basques fled the region as the Fascist troops advanced on the Basque Country.

In 1939, Carnés, a fresh voice in Spanish literature and prolific journalist for the Communist cause during the war, was among the 500,000 refugees who fled to France, and she was later one of the small number of intellectuals who was granted political asylum in Mexico. Among her possessions as she fled Spain was her writing portfolio, containing her unpublished stories. Four of these stories are included in the collection *Thirteen Stories* (Hoja de Lata, 2017).

In exile, Carnés remained committed to the Republican cause,

i. Carballés, Jesús J. Alonso. "El primer exilio de los vascos, 1936-1939." *Historia contemporánea*, vol. 62, 2020. <https://www.ehu.eus/ojs/index.php/HC>

as evidenced through her literary production and political activism. In 1959, marking the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conclusion of the civil war, Carnés was a signatory on a public statement demanding that persecution under Franco end and that Republican exiles be allowed to return to Spain,<sup>ii</sup> a hope that she and other exiles continued to hold. Between 1940-1963, Carnés published ten stories dealing with the Spanish Civil War and its effects, some scenes from the war, all an indictment against war and call to action and peace. She collected these stories under the title "Where the Laurel Tree Sprouted,"<sup>iii</sup> which now serves as the title to the second volume of her *Complete Stories* (Espuela de Plata, 2018). "Without a Compass" was first published January 8, 1956 in Mexican culture magazine *El Nacional*, where she also worked as a journalist. Characteristic of

Carnés's work, the experience of women and children takes center stage. An example of her social realism, this gripping study of tragedies and hardships facing civilians chips away at the maternal veneer associated with the trope of "mothers and children." Although inextricably tied to her experience of 1930s Spain, Carnés's work transcends time and place. Her stories speak to us in our own time of political extremism, war, and displaced populations and are a warning against the dehumanization of suffering. Her language is by turns realistic, lyrical, grim, tough, and tender as she exposes another face of the consequences of war.

LUISA CARNÉS (1905-1964) rose to prominence in the literary circles of 1930s Madrid that were dominated by the male voices of the Generation of '27. She has been referred to by many as the best

ii. Plaza Plaza, Antonio. "Introducción," *Rojo y Gris: Cuentos completos Vol. I* by Lusia Carnés (38).

iii. Plaza Plaza 47.

writer of her time. Now, eighty years after her exile from Francoist Spain, Carnés is again a figure of interest in Spanish literature. A militant feminist who supported the communist movement, she produced markedly autobiographical work that focused on freedom, equality, and the precarious economic position of women.

CATHERINE NELSON is Professor of Spanish at Nebraska Wesleyan University and a literary translator specializing in contemporary Spanish narrative. She is the translator of *Lights on the Sea* (2018) by Miquel Reina and her work has appeared in a variety of journals, including *Indiana Review* and *InTranslation*. She was awarded a 2019 PEN/Heim Translation grant for her translation of *Tea Rooms: Working Women* (1934) by Luisa Carnés.