

In 2019 the Oxford German Network and New Books in German held a translation competition for UK undergraduates. Entrants were asked to produce a translation into English of Chapter One of Vincenzo Todisco's *Das Eidechsenkind*, as well as a commentary explaining points of interest and indicating any particular translation difficulties they encountered. We are delighted to present Beth Molyneux's winning sample translation and commentary.

## **The Lizard**

**by Vincenzo Todisco**

**Sample translation by Beth Molyneux**

**© 2018, Rotpunktverlag**

### **Chapter 1**

The child opens first his left eye, then his right. His head is in two places. Now in Ripa, where nothing can happen to him, and now in the apartment, where he has to count his steps. Four steps to the table, two to get under the cabinet, one long step to the sink and then ten short steps out of the kitchen and into the middle of the long corridor. It's furthest to *stanza in fondo*, the room right at the back. If the worst happens, he has exactly twenty-three steps to get in there and into the wardrobe.

The child wants to count his steps outdoors as well. But out there the bright light shoots him in the face, making him blind.

At night the wolves come. Then he must tread quietly. The wolves nearly always find the child. They lean over the bed, baring their teeth. The child calls quietly for Nonna Assunta, who lives far away in Ripa. The child hears Nonna Assunta's voice: "Speak to me," she whispers, "speak to me and clench your fists tight, then the wolves won't do anything to you."

—

There's a knock at the door. It must be Carlos's mother, needing flour again, always in a hurry because she doesn't want to leave Carlos alone for too long. The mother goes to open up. She comes into the kitchen to get the flour out of the cabinet and goes back to the door. The child hears the two women talking to each other. "He is too fat, my Carlos, far too fat," the woman sobs. The mother says she ought to go to the doctor, and hands her the flour. Carlos's mother explains to her that she's already been with him to the hospital. No one could help her. They carry on back and forth like this for a little while, until Carlos's mother says she has to go now, and the mother adds that she, too, still has so much to do. The child listens in right until the very last word. He knows the instructions. The minute that the mother lets a visitor in, he must crawl under the cabinet. If he is standing in the corridor he has thirteen steps' time to hide himself in the wardrobe in the *stanza in fondo*.

—

On Sundays, the father goes to the shanty to play at cards or Boccia with his work colleagues. Beforehand the men sit in the kitchen for a while and drink coffee. They talk about the construction site, about food, about summer back home, where the trembling heat makes the work arduous. It's

because the land there is flat, hilly at best, one of the men reckons. On the construction site here in the host country it's hardly easier because of the cold, the father chips in. Your hands get chapped and the sweat dries cold under your clothes. While the father talks, the mother pours the grappa and puts the coffee on again.

The men drink a second and a third cup. They are tired from the week's work. They laugh, because one of them has nodded off in his chair while smoking.

The mother takes her leave. She's arranged to help Carlos's mother with pickling the artichokes. Only then do the men begin to talk about women. They talk as though life would be a fallacy without a certain type of woman. The father has a particular liking for American actresses: for him Marilyn Monroe is the measure of all things womanly. He has a picture of her cut out from a magazine. In the shanty each guest worker puts up a frayed picture on the wall with drawing pins. This way each of them has a secret sweetheart. Sofia Lore, Gina Lollobrigida, Mariangela Melato, Claudia Cardinale, they're the prettiest, but it's only the father, with his American nickname, Al, who has picked out an American woman for himself, and the prettiest of the pretty at that.

No longer obliged to live in the shanty, the father carries Marilyn's picture in his wallet. The child isn't supposed to say anything to the mother. But he knows that the mother has often seen the picture in the wallet before. And he knows that it makes no difference to her. It also hasn't escaped him that the father sometimes heads out with his work colleagues to visit the women. The men laugh about it. The child imagines a plethora of Marilyn Monroes, each one giving the men a picture to take with them, so that they can put it up on the wall in the shanty.

When the men drink coffee, the child isn't in the kitchen. But he hears what goes on in there.

—

Every week ends with Sunday, but when the days grow shorter, shorter and darker, it sometimes happens that the mother stands at the cooking stove on Sundays, crying. When she wants to suppress the tears, she bites her lips so hard together that her chin trembles. In the father's presence she doesn't even let the tears surface.

The record player stands in the kitchen next to the cabinet. During the week the child is allowed to put on records. When one has come to an end, the child steps to the record player, cautiously lifts the arm, guides it back to the outer edge of the disc and lays the needle on the first groove. Once the music begins to play out, the child imagines singular things.

"If the wolves scratch at the door with their claws," he whispers, "then I'll climb into the boat." The mother carries the child to the *stanza in fondo*. "Where is this boat then?" she asks anxiously. The child points with his finger towards the window. He wants to be lifted up, so that he can point below, towards the paving in the inner courtyard which is overgrown with a thin layer of moss. That's where the boat is.

—

After Sunday comes the day when the work at the construction site gets going again. That's how it is every week. From one Sunday to the next is a protracted expanse of time. Since the curtains are nearly always closed in the apartment, the child barely gets to see anything of the day.

At night he is torn from his sleep by the wolves' cries. His eyes are so sticky that he can't even open them. This makes his head feel queasy and he talks into the silence.

During the day the child would like to do the things he does in Ripa, launching into somersaults, jumping off the edge of the bed onto the floor, riding bikes with his older cousin, chasing a ball in the garden. The father wipes the sweat from his forehead and tells the mother she should see to it that the child keeps quiet. At every noise he glances at the door.

His concerns aren't exaggerated. The father knows of a couple who drugged their child so that it stayed quiet in the boot during the car journey. The mother's face is serious as she looks at the child and asks, "Did you hear that?". She tells him that she met a young woman on the train, barely more than a girl, who was carrying a baby in her arms. Her tears were falling onto the face of the new-born child. They sent her back at the border.

That's why the child looks around in constant fright. He places himself behind the kitchen door or in the storeroom. Or he climbs into the wardrobe in the *stanza in fondo*. A wan light shines through the chinks. When the child holds his breath in the wardrobe, everything becomes twice as still.

In the kitchen, only the music from the record player can fill the emptiness. There are songs which hit the child right in the pit of his stomach. "Quando sie qui con me ... questa stanza non ha più pareti ...". "In a room without walls there are no corners for me to hide in," says the child. The parents have no time to listen to him. They are occupied with other things. The year is 1961 and it's from here that their calculation starts. They are giving themselves five years' time, then they want to have earned enough money and return home. Before long they want to bring the child back to Ripa so that he can stay with Nonna Assunta for a long time.

---

### Commentary

The primary challenge which this text poses arises from the fact that in German 'das Kind' is grammatically neutral, meaning that the gender of the protagonist is never revealed to us. We may well find this out later in the novel, but the German retains an ambiguity around the child's identity which is very difficult to render in English. On a grammatical level, 'it' is probably the closest solution to the German's 'es', and from the point of view of identity, is the pronoun I was most inclined to use, but referring to the human child in this way read too strangely in English, especially given the title of the work; it might suggest too literal an interpretation of Todisco's metaphor by labelling the child as 'it'. It was therefore unfortunately necessary to ascribe a gender to the child. For this I took my cue from the blurb, which refers to the child as 'der Junge'; whether this is explicitly revealed over the course of the novel or not, the definite attribution of gender to what is referred to as 'es' in the original still niggles as an imperfect translation but is, to my view, the only one possible.

There were occasional issues with vocabulary, arising on the one hand from words such as 'Kredenz', for which it is difficult to find an English equivalent which is both accurate, and understandable for a modern audience. For words such as 'Gastland', it is difficult to find an English translation which conveys the wealth of implications associated with this concept, and its relationship to the 'Gastarbeiter', the English 'guest worker' and 'host country' not being as closely related linguistically.

It was also necessary to accept that not all of Todisco's stylistic choices (such as the alliteration of 'Schritte' and 'Schrank) *can* be adequately transferred into English. I have, however, taken the approach of using idiomatic phrasing or rhetorical devices wherever possible in my translation, in the hope that those stylistic aspects of the German which cannot be rendered are made up for by stylistic English in other places.