OBSERVATORIO
de la lengua española y las culturas hispánicas en los Estados Unidos

Instituto Cervantes

TRANSLATORS' CORNER
RINCÓN de TRADUCTORES

Eight Poems

by Luis Alberto de Cuenca

translated by
Gustavo Pérez Firmat

RT/TC 024 (2022)
ISSN: 2694-2801

Instituto Cervantes at Harvard University (FAS)
Observatorio de la lengua española y las culturas hispánicas en los Estados Unidos / Observatory of the Spanish Language and Hispanic Cultures in the United States
2 Arrow Street 4th fl., Faculty of Arts and Sciences - Harvard University. Cambridge, MA 02138 – USA
http://cervantesobservatory.fas.harvard.edu
info-observatory@fas.harvard.edu

Introduction

Luis Alberto de Cuenca was born in Madrid on September 29, 1950. He holds a doctorate in Classic Philology from the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. Currently he is research professor at the Centro Superior de Investigaciones Científicas. From 1996 to 2000 he was the director of Spain's Biblioteca Nacional. He has won many prizes for both his scholarly and his creative work, among them the Premio Nacional de Traducción (1989), the Premio Nacional de Poesía (2015), and the Premio Internacional de Poesía Federico García Lorca (2021). Cuenca's first book of poetry, *Los retratos,* was published in 1971. Since then, he has published more than thirty other poetry collections. He has gathered his complete poems under the title *El mundo y los días,* whose most recent edition dates from 2019. In addition, he has written lyrics for the Spanish singer Loquillo and the rock group Orquesta Mondragón.

Initially embracing the "culturalista" aesthetics of the 1970s, with its reliance on allusiveness and experimentation, Cuenca's poetry has evolved toward greater and greater simplicity. He describes his mature poetry as "poesía de línea clara." His poems, elegant yet devious, explore the expressive resources of the conversational register by making use of a variety of materials: classical antiquity, comic books, cartoons, Hollywood movies, slang, urban culture. Perhaps more than any of his contemporaries, he has been a major influence on younger Spanish poets.

The eight poems included in this selection are taken from two of the collections that Cuenca has published during the last few years. **"La brisa de la calle"** (presented here in English translation as "The Breeze Outside"), **"Plegaria de la buena muerte"** ("Prayer for a Good Death"), **"Campo florido"** ("Field in Flower"), **"Amor y psique"** ("Eros and Psyche"), and **"Vuelve Guillermo de Aquitania"** ("William of Aquitaine Returns") appeared in *Cuaderno de vacaciones* (2014). **"Tristeza verdadera"** ("True misery"), ***"In Illo Tempore"*** ("*In illo tempore*"), and **"Sobre un tema de Julio Martínez Mesanza"** ("On a Theme by Julio Martínez Mesanza") appeared in *Volveremos a vernos* (2018).

© Gustavo Pérez Firmat
Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner 024 (2022)
ISSN: 2694-2801

© *Instituto Cervantes at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Harvard University*

About the translator

Gustavo Pérez Firmat has published several books of poetry in Spanish and English, among them *Bilingual Blues* (1995) and *Sin lengua, deslenguado* (2017). His books of cultural criticism include *Life on the Hyphen* (1994-2012) and *Tongue Ties* (2003). He teaches at Columbia University, where he is the David Feinson Professor in the Humanities.

gpf@columbia.edu

© Gustavo Pérez Firmat
Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner 024 (2022)
ISSN: 2694-2801

© *Instituto Cervantes at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Harvard University*

THE BREEZE OUTSIDE

You're sitting in your favorite easy chair
before a crackling fire, thinking about
what lies beyond the bolt on your door
and your books. Does anything exist,
really, beyond the walls of your house?
You've always been drawn to the fantastic.
You've always viewed life through
the eyes of literature. But you've never known,
too little interest or not enough courage,
what it's like outside (or if there *is* an outside).
It's time you found out. Unbolt the door,
open the windows. You'll see the life out there:
fabulous creatures, monsters
not even Machen could have imagined
in his darkest deranged nightmares,
heroines blonder than those in your books,
heroes more generous toward the weak
than those in your comics, villains more cruel
than those in the movies. Let the light
of the real enter your life, let the breeze
of truth that blows in the streets caress you.

© Gustavo Pérez Firmat
Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner 024 (2022)
ISSN: 2694-2801

© *Instituto Cervantes at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Harvard University*

TRUE MISERY

When I was young
I didn't know what
misery was. My poems
wallowed in fake despair,
fictitious distress,
spectacular melancholy.
Now that I'm old
and truly miserable,
I can't find the words
for the griefs
that devour me.
I can only write:
"It's dark", "it's cold."
The sort of rubbish
that means nothing.

© Gustavo Pérez Firmat
Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner 024 (2022)
ISSN: 2694-2801

© *Instituto Cervantes at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Harvard University*

PRAYER FOR A GOOD DEATH

Now that death is not so far away
(in truth it was always nearby),
and keeps making passes at me,
I remember —because it's thundering—
to ask the Gods of my childhood,
the Gods of my ancestors, for a good death.
I remember, above all, the One
who is three (like Mike Moorcock's Corum):
the cantankerous Old Man
who presided over the Old Testament,
the handsome Young Man crucified
in the New, and the *Pneuma* or Holy Spirit
who merges and gathers them in the Dove
that crowns the Old Man's forehead.
God of my childhood, even if you don't exist
(do I?) I want to ask you formally
and in writing (I'm having this notarized)
to make my terrifying transit to the icy stars
(or to scalding Tartarus) peaceful and painless.
I'm asking to pass on to the light (or the darkness)
without hysterics, without making a nuisance of myself,
after making peace with you and my loved ones.

© Gustavo Pérez Firmat
Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner 024 (2022)
ISSN: 2694-2801

© *Instituto Cervantes at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Harvard University*

I understand that many things enter into how one dies,
that it's generally unpleasant (an agony, as you well know).
I also understand that you can't give every guy
off the street a serene and blessed death.
Further, I confess I'm not a good Christian.
I have no empathy toward the sick or the destitute.
I have no right to ask but still I'm asking, shielded
by the faith of my elders, by my legendary nerve,
and by the unfathomable depths of your mercy.
Grant me a good death, Lord,
be kind to me in my last moments, I beg you.

© Gustavo Pérez Firmat
Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner 024 (2022)
ISSN: 2694-2801

© *Instituto Cervantes at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Harvard University*

FIELD IN FLOWER

On this Field one fights for glory,
assuming such a thing exists.
On this Field ploughshares turn into swords,
cavalieri say goodbye to their ladies
forever, burn their memories in the bonfire
of endless combat. This is the Field
from which no one returns, where no one
has a name, a family, a lineage,
where the only relation is war.
Forget your past. Come to the fire
of naked leaves, broken lances, riderless horses.
Come to the constant fire of unknown heroes,
to the meadow of myths that don't explain
anything. Don't delay, hurry,
come before the Field in Flower sinks
into the shadows of a fading dream.

© Gustavo Pérez Firmat
Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner 024 (2022)
ISSN: 2694-2801

© *Instituto Cervantes at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Harvard University*

IN ILLO TEMPORE

Your parents had gone somewhere
and we had the house to ourselves,
just like the abandoned convent
in that poem by Jaime Gil de Biedma.
With the music going full blast,
you mixed us an explosive cocktail
while I, sweetly, took off your shirt.
You filled two glasses to the brim.
We drank up. We began to giggle.
Our eyes shone with the ardor of youth,
and we kissed like they do in movies,
and we loved like they do in songs.

When our days met our desires
and our kingdom was not of this world.

© Gustavo Pérez Firmat
Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner 024 (2022)
ISSN: 2694-2801

© *Instituto Cervantes at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Harvard University*

WILLIAM OF AQUITAINE RETURNS

I'm going to make a poem out of nothing.
You and I will be the protagonists.
Our emptiness, our loneliness,
the deadly boredom, the daily defeats:
all these things will go into the poem,
which is bound to be short, since they
fit in a few lines, maybe as few as seven,
or perhaps eight, if this last line counts.

© Gustavo Pérez Firmat
Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner 024 (2022)
ISSN: 2694-2801

© *Instituto Cervantes at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Harvard University*

EROS AND PSYCHE

You have no idea how it came to this.
You wake up in the morning
to discover that your furniture is gone,
that your books have disappeared,
that there's no light anywhere,
and that even the faintest trace
of the marvelous body that slept with you
last night has vanished into thin air.

© Gustavo Pérez Firmat
Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner 024 (2022)
ISSN: 2694-2801

© *Instituto Cervantes at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Harvard University*

ON A THEME BY JULIO MARTÍNEZ MESANZA

I don't want to be happy. I'm sick
of so much happiness. It angers me
that people love me, that the gods protect me.
I refuse to be the life of the party.
I renounce the power of family and wealth.
I don't want to see you by my side,
in my car, glowing and cheerful,
anticipating my hidden desires.
I'm no longer amused when my friends
praise the whiteness of your hands.
I detest success, and flights of fancy,
and the spark of genius, and love,
and the gardens of the cheerful.
I long for darkness, for the sadness
that wounds. I need to despair.
So much joy is killing me.

© Gustavo Pérez Firmat
Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner 024 (2022)
ISSN: 2694-2801

© *Instituto Cervantes at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Harvard University*

Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner

Disponibles en/available at: http://cervantesobservatorio.fas.harvard.edu/en/translation-corner

1. RT/TC 001 (2019). "A Letter of Federico García Lorca to his Parents, 1935". Author: Federico García Lorca (Spain); Translator: Christopher Maurer; Genre: Letter.

2. RT/TC 002 (2019). "Like a Night with Legs Wide Open". Author: José Alcántara Almánzar (Dominican Republic); Translator: Luis Guzmán Valerio; Genre: Short Story.

3. RT/TC 003 (2019). "In the Parks, at Dusk" and "I Only Think of You". Author: Marina Mayoral (Spain); Translator: María Socorro Suárez Lafuente; Genre: Short Story.

4. RT/TC 004 (2020). "The Guide through Death" and "The Fat Lady". Author: Guadalupe Dueñas (Mexico); Translator: Josie Hough; Genre: Short Story.

5. RT/TC 005 (2020). "The Case of the Unfaithful Translator". Author: José María Merino (Spain); Translator: Erin Goodman; Genre: Short Story.

6. RT/TC 006 (2020). "The Guerrilla Fighter" and "May as Well Call it Quits". Author: Albalucía Ángel Marulanda (Colombia); Translator: Daniel Steele Rodríguez; Genre: Short Story.

7. RT/TC 007 (2020). "Miguel Hernández' Speech to His Companions in the Ocaña Jail". Author: Miguel Hernández (Spain); Translator: Constance Marina; Genre: Speech.

8. RT/TC 008 (2020). "On the Road to Houmt Souk". Author: Soledad Puértolas (Spain); Translator: Francisca González Arias; Genre: Short Story.

9. RT/TC 009 (2020). *Rincón de Traductores / Translators' Corner – Volume 1: Compilation 2019-2020*. Various Authors; Various Translators.

10. RT/TC 010 (2020). *Waiting for the Revolution: Cuba, the Unfinished Journey* (excerpt). Author: Gustavo Gac-Artigas (Chile); Translator: Andrea G. Labinger; Genre: Chronicle.

© Gustavo Pérez Firmat
Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner 024 (2022)
ISSN: 2694-2801

© *Instituto Cervantes at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Harvard University*

11. RT/TC 011 (2020). "A Bad Girl". Author: Montserrat Ordóñez (Colombia); Translator: Clara Eugenia Ronderos; Genre: Short Story.

12. RT/TC 012 (2020). "Claudia and the Cats". Author: Ivanna Chapeta (Guatemala); Translator: Lindsay Romanoff Bartlett; Genre: Short Story.

13. RT/TC 013 (2021). *Song of Being and Nonbeing*. Author: Santiago Alba Rico (Spain); Translator: Carolina Finley Hampson; Genre: Poetry.

14. RT/TC 014 (2021). "Christmas Eve in the Hills of Jaruco". Author: Robert F. Lima Rovira and Robert Lima (Cuba/USA); Translator: Robert lima; Genre: Chronicle.

15. RT/TC 015 (2021). *Three Poems*. Author: José Luis García Martín (Spain); Translator: Claudia Quevedo-Webb; Genre: Poetry.

16. RT/TC 016 (2021). *A Manifesto for reading* (excerpt). Author: Irene Vallejo (Spain); Translator: Erin Goodman; Genre: Essay.

17. RT/TC 017 (2021). *Parallel 35* (three excerpts) and "The Dead Woman". Author: Carmen Laforet (Spain); Translator: Roberta Johnson; Genre: Chronicle/Short Story.

18. RT/TC 018 (2021). "Torn Lace" and "Native Plant". Author: Emilia Pardo Bazán (Spain); Translator: Francisca González Arias; Genre: Short Story.

19. RT/TC 019 (2020). *Rincón de Traductores / Translators' Corner – Volume 2: Compilation 2020-2021*. Various Authors; Various Translators.

20. RT/TC 020 (2021). *Three Poems*. Author: Julia Barella (Spain); Translator: Sarah Glenski; Genre: Poetry.

21. RT/TC 021 (2021). *Five Galician Songs*. Author: Emilio Cao (Spain); Translator: Robert Lima; Genre: Poetry.

22. RT/TC 022 (2022). *The KIO Towers*. Author: José Luis Castillo Puche (Spain); Translator: Douglas Edward LaPrade; Genre: Poetry.

23. RT/TC 023 (2022). "One Hundred Cornfields of Solitude". Author: Melanie Márquez Adams (Ecuador); Translator: Emily Hunsberger; Genre: Chronicle.

© Gustavo Pérez Firmat
Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner 024 (2022)
ISSN: 2694-2801

© *Instituto Cervantes at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Harvard University*