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Translator's Preface

Annette H. Levine

Cristina Peri Rossi has said that she doesn't choose her translators, they choose her. Although I wish I could boast that Paula Varsavsky sought after me to translate her short stories, such is not the case. I first came to know Varsavsky when reading *Nadie alzaba la voz* (1994). I wanted to translate her novel and give voice to the young female narrator yearning to be heard. I was too late. It had already been translated by Anne McLean as *No One Said a Word* (2000). I was ruthless and wrote to the young Argentine author, claiming affinity for her work. Varsavsky, who has recently finished another novel and contributes regularly to *Clarín* and *El País*, has since entrusted me with the translation of several of her short stories.

"The Portrait" is the first of a series I hope to publish in English. Capturing Varsavsky's narrative voice, that which has drawn me to her work, has been my greatest challenge. The narrator is both adult and child, angry and loving, hurt and wise. While the repetition of the word "Mom" may burden the reader, the mother is obviously the driving force and the traumatic element of the story. I took liberties to modify the word in order to help resound Varsavsky's tone. The use of "Mommy" at the end, for example, helps accentuate the narrator's love for her mother despite her mother's neglect and arrogance.

"The Portrait" by Paula Varsavsky

Translated by Annette H. Levine

The art gallery I'll be showing my watercolors in is just around the corner from the building where I spent the first twenty years of my life. Every time I walk by the entrance I turn to glance at it, involuntarily. The two large, light sienna wood doors are open at times, closed at others, depending on the time of day. When all is said and done, I know I had some happy childhood moments there. Mom seemed to be in good spirits at times. Her long, straight, blonde hair would sometimes shine. And sometimes, the four of us would even laugh together at the table. Dad had already left.

Mom lived in the apartment on Santa Fe and Talcahuano for forty years. She threw us all out. First dad, then my two older brothers, Joaquín and Lucio, and finally me.

I must admit that there's one person who remained by her side all those years, her name was Felipa. She was petite, agile, and slept in a narrow hallway beside the kitchen where a bed could hardly fit. She earned a servant's wage (when Mom remembered to pay her). Nevertheless, she was like a mother, grandmother, secretary, chef, confessor and spiritual advisor to the whole family.

According to Mom, the apartment we lived in was small, old and dark. It was run-down for lack of maintenance. It needed to be redecorated. There was some truth to that. But what was really small was my mother's heart. Nothing and nobody fit inside.

Mom did nothing but remind me that she had grown up in San Isidro and that she hadn't attended a state school like mine, but a British school. We went to school wearing a white apron over our street clothes. The smock repulsed her. At the British schools they wore a uniform with a tie. Even though a teacher threw chalk at Mom when she misbehaved, and she hadn't learned anything but English, she was stubborn. "I went to much better schools than you," she insisted in English, a language that generally was mixed with her awful Spanish.

Whenever we took a taxi, Mom criticized the cabby in English. She would say, "This guy's nuts." She would continue until the despondent driver turned to respond: "Madam, I speak English too."

According to Mom, Dad had left her. He left her for a philosophy professor, like himself. The word philosophy sounded foreign coming from my mother's mouth. So did the word poetry. Dad would write poetry in his free time. "Three children, but he wrote poetry instead of trying to earn more money. An intellectual, an armchair leftist." On the other hand, Mom lived in what she called reality: she worked as a bilingual secretary or interpreter until she was inevitably fired by whomever she worked for.

Mom took me out with her on Saturday mornings. First I had to go to the hairdresser with her. Then she would drag me along Alvear Avenue or Arroyo Street. We went to exclusive *haute couture* boutiques with names like *L'Interdit* or *La Clocharde*. None of the clients knew what these words meant or how to pronounce them. French wasn't considered a mark of high culture in Buenos Aires in the seventies. The saleswomen, while holding long phone conversations, looked everyone up and down as they entered the boutique. They would put their hand over the mouthpiece with the sole purpose of rattling off some outlandish price. Mom would try on just about everything in the store. She would usually leave an item on hold to pick up later, the day she managed to get the money together.

Joaquín suggested that she buy clothing from the less expensive shops along Santa Fe. Mom looked at him defiantly, offended. She let out an ironic cackle. Such stores weren't for her. Maybe this was one of my mother's biggest problems: she was born offended. Any remark we made brought her back to that first offense.

My brothers left together. One was sixteen, the other seventeen. I was thirteen. Mom couldn't stand them anymore. They didn't pay attention to her. One excelled in his studies, the other overslept. Overnight, there were no longer any men at home. The first night we ate dinner without them, Felipa set my placemat facing Mom's. I had always sat alongside her until then. Perhaps it was the first time Mom and I looked at one another. It gave me some hope.

"You don't know what you were like as an adolescent. Unbearable. The things you did! I had to put up with you!" Mom repeated years later. My

girlfriends' mothers and the mothers of the guys I dated disagreed with her accusation. Nevertheless, she was totally convinced of her assessment.

The men in my family kept migrating further and further away. Dad was living in Bariloche. My brothers had gone to the northern hemisphere—one to California, the other to Paris. According to Mom it was Daddy's fault. He gave them the incentive. He planted the idea in their heads that they should leave the country. Mom's inopportune nationalism was incomprehensible to me.

Mom had a boyfriend here and there; I stopped learning their names. It wasn't worth it. Felipa prepared exquisite meals for them—calamari stuffed with vegetable soufflé, orange pancakes or floating islands for dessert. These men would eat and leave. I ate in silence, seated once again, alongside Mom.

Upon finishing high school I began courses at the Art Institute. I especially liked pencil drawing and watercolors. I also took classes in body language. Mom questioned me relentlessly about this. What was it based in? How could anyone who did these things support themselves? With some linguistic juggling I managed to give her coherent responses. I wanted to appease her. Speaking of the body, it occurred to me that my mother had never given me a hug.

When I was twenty, Mom, who was seated at the side of the table with the lighter colored panels, insisted that I contribute money to cover my expenses. Months earlier she had assured me that I could stay at home until I was done with school. I was speechless. She showed me a list that included half of everything, even Felipa's paycheck. Dad was still sending Mom money to support me. Both of my brothers were still sending her money in foreign currency. The one to one dollar-peso exchange, however, meant that she lost much of the profit. According to Mom, foreign currency was useless. You had to earn pesos.

I left that house which had rarely felt like a home.

My drawings were getting better. The professor inspired me. I labored passionately over portraits. I went over to Mom's for lunch sometimes. She was usually on the phone. I ate alone in the dining room. I spoke to Felipa, who stood by my side after proudly serving me one of her dishes: an appetizer, an entrée, and a dessert. Afterwards, she'd offer me coffee.

Mom continued on the phone but was always about to hang up, she assured me.

Jorge, Mom's legendary suitor, began dining with her on a regular basis. I was surprised. Mom tended to neglect her constant telephone calls. He even managed to visit her several times. As he sat buried in the feather sofa pillows with Bulgarian upholstery, you could only see his prominent round belly, his double chin propped over the neck of a shirt buttoned up to the top, and his aquiline nose. Mom listened impatiently to his endless and disconnected stories. "He's a snob—always exaggerating." They dated when they were teens. Jorge's love for Mom continued unshaken three decades later. He and Mom eventually moved into the Santa Fe apartment together.

I got married shortly thereafter, had two daughters, and then separated. My husband left me when our youngest daughter took her first steps. I continued living with the girls in the apartment in San Telmo. It was a relief—I began to draw again, more driven. On the days I changed my daughter's first diaper, registered my daughters for school, and made play-dates for them, I had the keen sense that Mom had never done any such thing for me.

Lucky for Mom, Joaquín earned a fortune in Silicon Valley. He gave her a large sum of money. My brother told me that she and Jorge moved to a lavish apartment on Figueroa Alcorta and Casares. Their view spans from the Japanese garden to the parks in Palermo. And in the distance you can see the monument dedicated to the Spaniards. Mom invited him over to see the renovations. Joaquín thought aloud—he told me how much she spent on that property and the cost of the renovations. "Mom will never become a rational being," he affirmed while shaking his head.

I'm thirty-five now. I haven't seen Mom in four years. Every now and then I find out she's visiting one of my brothers. She doesn't tell me when she goes or when she returns. I'm getting things ready for a watercolor exhibit. Right now I'm finishing up one of the portraits I like best. I drew Mommy. I sketched her as I remember her, as I loved her—as a young woman. Tall, slender, with long blonde hair and brown eyes. Pretty and cold. I also drew myself, seven years old, next to her. I look to her eyes with admiration, dying for this woman to be my mother. Mom's gaze, however, is fixed elsewhere.