

UC Santa Barbara

Translation Studies Journal

Title

Translator's Preface, by Cristina de la Torre. Excerpt from Past Perfect (Pasado perfecto) by Leonardo Padura Fuentes

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/11d0x200>

Journal

Translation Studies Journal, 1(1)

ISSN

1555-8614

Author

De la Torre, Cristina

Publication Date

2005

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**Excerpt from *Past Perfect (Pasado perfecto)*
by Leonardo Padura Fuentes¹**

Translated by Cristina de la Torre

My story was called "Sundays," and it was not only true but also autobiographical. It started one Sunday morning when the mother of the main character (my own mother) woke him up: "Time to get up, son, it's seven thirty," and he knew that this morning he would not eat breakfast, or just linger in bed, or play ball, since it was Sunday and he had to go to church, just like every other Sunday, while his friends ("They're all going to burn in hell" my/his mother would say) would spend that sole school-free morning hanging out, or playing ball in the alley or in the barren field by the quarry. The story seemed to me quite anticlerical (I had read Boccaccio and that term was clearly explained in the prologue), so I figured that made me anticlerical too, since the obligation of attending church interfered with all I ever wanted to do, which was to be a baseball player. So I went ahead and wrote it, playing down the anticlerical part, just giving some hints of it here and there, mere suggestions, or better yet submersions, like Hemingway's iceberg. And that was the story I took to the workshop.

Feeling like a writer was really amazing, even though in fact the workshop was more like a circus. It had everything, from the only two openly gay guys in school, Millán and Pancho the wiry black kid, to the captain of the basketball team who wrote these lengthy "sonnets"; from Adita Vélez, so refined, so beautiful, so delicate that it was impossible to imagine her in the daily act of shitting a turd, to Miki Babyface, the school stud who had yet to write his first line and was only there to pick up chicks; from Anfón the Dark who rarely went to class, to Olguita the literature teacher who was the sponsor of the project; including me and also Cojo, who was both the creator and the soul of the workshop. People would point to him and whisper "There goes a real poet" since he'd already published a few lines of verse in *The Bearded Alligator*, and because he wore these white dress shirts with rolled-up sleeves—not because he was a poet but because he had no others. They were the remaining threads of the glorious days when his father worked as a sales rep in Venezuela in

the late fifties, just when Cojo was born. For that reason, he was technically Venezuelan, yet Cojo truly belonged in that old Havana neighborhood of La Víbora. He was the one who got the idea of turning our labors into a literary journal, which led to the catastrophe.

We all got together Friday afternoons under the carob trees in the P.E. field, and our *profe* Olguita would bring a huge thermos filled with iced tea. The evening would usually find us still in a shoot-out over poems and short stories, fiercely critiquing each other's work, looking for things that could be improved—the historical context, for instance—or trying to figure out if the text was escapist or realist, discussing the theme and the topic, the kinds of things that were drummed into us in the classroom as if they really did not want us to enjoy reading. But Olguita, our cool *profe*, skipped over that stuff and instead read us chapters from *Hopscotch* each week; we could tell she really loved it 'cause she'd always end up close to tears claiming that this was the real thing: literature. In my eyes she got to be more and more like La Maga, the novel's heroine, and I developed a real crush on her (although I was going steady with Cuqui and in love with Tamara at the time), even though Olguita's face was covered with tiny little pockmarks and she was at least ten years older than me. She was all for publishing a monthly journal with the best of the workshop pieces.

The best pieces. Boy, did we ever fight about those. Because, of course, we all wrote great things and needed a whole book to publish them all. So Cojo came up with the concept of number zero—I was stunned by this, since it really was number one, and zero is only zero and all I could imagine was a journal with blank pages or rather one that never was—and said that we had to be really exacting, and that he and Olguita would do the choosing this time, with our vote of confidence. And my "Sundays" was chosen. Talk about feeling like hot shit. I was absolutely thrilled to think that I was going to be a real writer, and Flaco and Jose were very happy for me, and Conejo was green with envy that my stuff would actually be in print. Number zero would also include two poems by Cojo, who had done the choosing, and one by his girlfriend who helped him, a story by Pancho the Black queen, an article by Adita reviewing the school play, another story by Carmita, plus an editorial by Olguita, our *profe*, to introduce number zero of *La Viboreña*, the journal of the José Martí

Literature Workshop of René O. Reiné High School. How exciting was that!

It was going to be ten pages long, and Cojo got hold of a ream of a thousand sheets, so we could put out a hundred copies. Olguita got permission from the administration to print and distribute them, and I spent my nights dreaming of *La Viboreña*, proof that I was a real writer. And then it was ready, after a whole night of copying and stapling. The next morning we stood at the school entrance passing it out to the students—with Cojo really looking like a waiter since he had not, for once, rolled up his sleeves, and Olguita, our cool *profe*, beaming proudly at us from the steps. It was the last time I ever saw her smile.

The next day the school secretary went from room to room asking that all who were involved in the journal report to the principal's office at two o'clock that afternoon. We were so full of ourselves, and so naïve, that we were expecting to receive certificates of achievement for having carried out such an innovative project, in addition to profuse congratulations and other gestures of encouragement. The principal asked us to sit down, along with the head of the literature department—who had never attended any of the workshop meetings—the secretary of the youth group, and Rafael Morín, who was wheezing as if he were about to have an asthma attack.

The principal, who would no longer be principal in a year thanks to the WaterPrep scandal, wanted to know about the journal's motto: "Communism is like an aspirin the size of the sun." What exactly did that mean? Did we perhaps consider socialism a headache? What was the intention of Ada Velez's criticism of the play about political prisoners in Chile? Did she mean to undermine both the efforts of the theater group and the message of the work? Why was it that every single poem was about love and there was no mention of the revolution, the life of any one of our heroes or the nation? Why was Conde's short story about a religious theme yet it contained no clear position against the church's backward scholastic teachings? And, to top it all off, we seemed totally drunk on our accomplishment, he said looming before puny Carmita who was visibly shaking, as his subordinates nodded in agreement. Why did we publish a story signed by Carmen Sedán on the theme of a girl who commits suicide because of an unhappy love affair? (And he said theme and not topic). Is

this the image of Cuban youth today that we ought to convey? Is this the example that we wish to present, instead of emphasizing the purity, the commitment, the generosity that should be the aim of new generations? And that's when all hell broke loose.

Our *profe* Olguita was red as a beet. She stood up, allow me to interrupt you, *compañero principal*, she said, and stared hard at the head of her department who began fidgeting with her nails, and at the principal who held her gaze. I have something to say, and she proceeded to say lots of things: that it was unethical for her not to be notified in advance of the topic of the meeting (she said topic and not theme); that she was totally against this inquisitorial approach; that she could not comprehend how it was possible to so misunderstand the initiatives and efforts of the students; that only political troglodytes could interpret the journal pieces in such a way; and, since it was evident from the accusations and the Stalinist point of view adopted by you and obviously shared by the department head, that there's no possibility of dialogue, then please accept my resignation since I will not be able to continue teaching in this school despite many sensitive and admirable students such as these—and she pointed to us and left the room, and I will never forget how flushed she was and crying and it was as if the little pockmarks in her face had all vanished and she had become the world's most beautiful woman.

We had all turned to stone, but then Carmita burst into tears and Cojo stared hard at the court judging us. At that moment Rafael stood up, he even forced a smile and went towards the principal. *Compañero principal*, he said, after this unfortunate incident I think it would be advisable to speak with the students, who are all excellent *compañeros*, and who will undoubtedly understand what you're trying to tell them. You yourself, Carmita, he said, putting a hand on her shoulder, probably gave no thought to the implications of that escapist story, but we have to be alert to these issues. Right? And I think the best thing to do would be to show that you can put together a publication worthy of our times, one that highlights the purity, the commitment, the generosity that ought to characterize future generations. Don't you agree, Carmita? And poor Carmita mumbled yes—unaware that she was saying yes forever—that Rafael was correct, and I wavered despite the reaction of our *profe* Olguita and what had been said about my own story. Then Cojo stood up and

excused himself saying that any complaints about his conduct should come from his department's committee and walked out, which cost him a year of having his rights limited and ruined his reputation. He's always been so stubborn and so mocking, not to mention self-absorbed, and all just because he's published a few measly poems, the department head commented after he was gone. And I wanted to die like I never have since. I was horrified. I was speechless—for I could not understand what I had done wrong—all I'd done was write what I felt, what had happened to me when I was little. I'd just said that I preferred playing baseball out in the street over going to church. Luckily I saved five copies of *La Viboreña*, which never reached number one, the issue that was going to be put together democratically, at the suggestion of our cool *profe*, Olguita, who was sure we could decide among ourselves by voting on the best materials from our abundant literary harvest.

Note

1. The novel tells the story of Mario Conde who longed to become a writer but grew up to be a reluctant detective in contemporary Cuba. In this scene, the protagonist recalls one of the early and key episodes of his truncated journey toward his dream of writing.