

**My Favorite Monster
and Other Poems**

Luis Alberto de Cuenca

Selected, Translated and with an Introduction by

Gustavo Pérez Firmat

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Introduction

As one of Spain's most celebrated and influential poets, Luis Alberto de Cuenca has won a wide international following. His poems have been translated into several languages, among them French, German and Italian, but thus far his appearances in English have been rare. *My Favorite Monster*, which gathers poems that span the whole of his career, is the first collection in English of Cuenca's poetry.

Trained in classical philology, Cuenca for many years was affiliated with the *Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas*, Spain's premier research institution. He has published widely on Latin and Greek literature, as well as on a broad range of modern authors. His translations and editions number in the dozens. He has also held important public posts: Director of Spain's National Library and Secretary of Culture. He is best known, however, as the author of a large body of accessible, elegant and witty poems. Some of them, like "La malcasada" / "Unhappily Married" and "El desayuno" / "Breakfast," have transcended literary circles to become part of the general culture. The latter, in particular, is sometimes read at weddings. As a self-described "pop poet," Cuenca has also written lyrics for the Spanish rocker Loquillo and the Basque band Orquesta Mondragón.

Like others of his contemporaries, Cuenca began by embracing what was called *culturalismo*, whose exponents wrote allusive, dense and often cryptic poems that divorced themselves from social and political realities. The titles of two early books, *Elsinore* (1972) and *Scholia* (1978), suggest that Cuenca's youthful poetry was something like a scholar's castle. Its walls were not impregnable, but the reader had to be prepared to negotiate the moat of their author's formidable

erudition. But by the time he published *La caja de plata* (The Silver Box) (1985), Cuenca had abandoned hermeticism for a communicative poetry, by turns upbeat and forlorn, whose inspiration was frankly autobiographical. His bookishness was now in the service of poems that addressed everyday concerns: happy and unhappy loves, fantasies and nightmares, the lineaments of big-city life, the pervasiveness of mass culture. Since then, in a steady stream of individual volumes, Cuenca has continued exploring the expressive resources of the conversational register. Borrowed from Franco-Belgian cartoonists like Hergé, his term for this kind of poetry is “poesía de línea clara” (“poetry with a clear line”).

All of the poems in this volume, which illustrate the range of his interests and moods, display clear lines. Literate but never obscure, they draw not only on classical and modern literature, but on comic books, cartoons, Hollywood movies, slang, urban culture. Alongside William of Acquitaine and John Donne, the reader will find *Star Wars* and *The Little Mermaid*. Alongside pastoral landscapes, the streets of Madrid. Alongside Eros and Psyche, an ex-wife or a future lover.

A word on how these translations came to be. Before attempting Luis Alberto's poems, I had translated only myself, occasionally, from English to Spanish. Confined and bored during the years of the pandemic, I got into the habit of listening to radio programs from Spain. The way Spaniards spoke reminded me of my paternal grandparents, who were Spanish, and of other people I had grown up around in Cuba. My favorite program was a weekly late-night show about movies and music called “Cowboys de Medianoche” (Midnight Cowboys). Luis Alberto, a life-long cinephile, was one of the regulars. Every show ended with a poetry spot: he would read one of his poems. I liked the poems and got hold of some of his books. Paging through them, I came across “Moisés.” To amuse

myself, I translated it.

I wrote it in English as if it had been my poem, as if it were being composed for the first time. If Luis Alberto was the ventriloquist, I was the dummy, mouthing his words as if they were my own, which in fact they were. And so I felt free to take liberties: to reword, rework, abridge (at times what is pithy in Spanish, if translated word for word, comes off as long-winded in English). Not least important, I rendered the metered poems as free verse. After I had turned "Moisés" into "Moses," I continued to other poems. Rather than for literalism, I aimed for consistency of tone and intention. As I wrote my versions, I shared them with Luis Alberto, who has excellent English (one of his half-dozen languages), and he was enthusiastic about them. Being far more learned than I, now and then he corrected my spelling of a foreign name.

I selected the poems to translate following a hunch. When I spotted a phrase or a line whose translation immediately occurred to me, I took this as an invitation to go ahead. The poem had opened a door for me. Once in a while it quickly shut the door in my face, but for the most part I was able to enter, and enter into, the poem, even if in the process I knocked over a chair or moved a sofa. By the time I was through rearranging the furniture, the room felt like home.

As I went from poem to poem, I discovered that his Spanish tended to sound like my English. Though his diction is more formal than mine, our voices mixed well. Transposing his clear melodic lines to a different key came naturally. (I'm not speaking, of course, of the quality of the writing but of the quality of the voice.) In addition, his likes and dislikes, how he wrote about men and women, his tastes in movies and music and books resonated with my own. As I recast his poems in English, it often seemed that I could have written them, had I his knowledge and talent. It is said that a translator

betrays his originals. This is probably true, as it is that translation, like reading, can be an instrument of discovery: without expecting it, you find yourself in another's words, as I have. I'm confident that the readers of this book will also find something of themselves in Luis Alberto's poems.

Gustavo Pérez Firmat
Chapel Hill, April 2023