

BRIEF ENCOUNTER

by Luis Alberto de Cuenca

for Juan Manuel de Prada

It happened in Salamanca, last November.
I ran into you on the street, as slender
as before, though a little bit worn.
You said you were teaching, I'm not sure
what, something odd, Cultural Theory
perhaps, and that it made you happy to explain
to your students all things human and divine.
You said your children had stayed in Madrid
with their father, that you saw them
three or four times a year (they're all grown up),
that you had finished your doctorate (finally),
and that the only thing you'd like
is a government job to travel the world in style.
As for me, I said, I'm only here for the day
to see a friend in Salamanca. And you said:
Are you in a hurry? How about a drink?

After many drinks, with the dawn in close pursuit,
I said: "Since you there's been no other woman."
It wasn't true. Inside me, deceit fed on desire.
Then everything—the dingy bar, you and me, the dark—
became as absurd and grotesque as life itself.

(translated from the Spanish by Gustavo Pérez Firmat)

Luis Alberto de Cuenca, a writer and scholar, possesses one of Spain's most distinctive poetic voices. In 2015, he received the National Poetry Prize for his book *Cuaderno de vacaciones*. From 1996 to 2000 he was the Director of Spain's national library, in 2021 won the prestigious Federico García Lorca International Poetry Prize, and in 2025 The Reina Sofía Prize for Poetry. "El encuentro" ("Brief Encounter") was originally published in Spanish in 1996 in *Por*

fuertes y fronteras. More recently, it appeared in Cuenca's retrospective collection, *Los mundos y los días: Poesía 1970-2009*, by Visor Libros in Madrid, Spain, in 2021.

Gustavo Pérez Firmat's writing has been published in *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Southern Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and other journals. He has published several books of poetry in Spanish and English, among them *Sin lengua*, *deslenguado* and *Bilingual Blues*. Pérez Firmat's books of cultural criticism include *Life on the Hyphen* and *Tongue Ties*. His most recent book is *My Favorite Monster*, a volume of translations of the poems of Spanish poet Luis Alberto de Cuenca, published by Lavender Ink in 2024. Pérez Firmat is the David Feinson Professor Emeritus of Humanities at Columbia University.