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Gustavo Pérez Firmat — "Car Trouble"

September 30, 2025 *in* *Prose*

A scholar and writer, ***Gustavo Pérez Firmat*** *is the David Feinson Professor Emeritus of Humanities at Columbia University, where he taught Latin American literature. His imaginative writing has been published in The Paris Review, Ploughshares, The Southern Review, The Carolina Quarterly, Michigan Quarterly Review, The Baltimore Review, North American Review, North Carolina Literary Review, and other journals. He has also published books of literary and cultural criticism, including A Cuban in Mayberry, Life on the Hyphen and Tongue Ties; a memoir, Next Year in Cuba, as well as several poetry collections in Spanish and English, including Equivocaciones, Bilingual Blues and Scar Tissue. My Favorite Monster, his translation of selected poems by noted Spanish poet, Luis Alberto de Cuenca appeared in 2024. His personal website: www.gustavoperezfirmat.com.*

Car Trouble

The scene in my mind is not the horse's head on bloodied sheets, Vito's collapse among the tomato plants or Fredo's assassination on Lake Tahoe at sunset. It's not even a scene. It's only a moment. Michael Corleone, the young godfather, leaves Cuba in a hurry on New Year's Eve, just as the Castro-led rebels are about to seize power. Back in Vegas, he asks the *consigliere* whether he got Michael's son something for Christmas. Yes, Tom says, "a little car with an electric motor that he can ride in." In the next scene, Michael arrives at the Corleone compound. As he walks to the house, he stops and stares at Anthony's little red roadster, half-buried in the snow. That's the moment.

Havana, 1958

Proust had his *madeleines,* Gatsby had the beacon across the bay, and I have Anthony's little car, which I would have called *una cuña*, the Spanish word for "wedge" that Cubans also use apropos of sleek sports cars.

I'm nine years old, living in a spacious art-deco-style home with my parents, my two younger brothers and our baby sister. The revolution that will make Michael Corleone flee Havana in a few days is about to transform my homeland and my home life. But all I'm thinking about is my Christmas gift. At the time the most elegant department store in Cuba was *El Encanto* (the name translates to "spell" or "enchantment"). Founded as a fabric store by two Spaniards at the end of the nineteenth century, by 1958 it had grown into a six-story building on the busy corner of Galiano and San Rafael. Two years later, in April 1961, anti-Castro arsonists burned it to the ground. It was never rebuilt.

The toy section was on the fourth floor. As Christmas approached, I knew exactly what I wanted: a fire-engine-red roadster with a motor. It was displayed on a platform in the middle of the floor. While my mother shopped and my brothers looked around, I circled the platform over and over.

Earlier in the year the tunnel under the bay of Havana had opened. An impressive engineering feat, it inspired a hit *chachachá* entitled "El túnel." In the lyric a young man who drives *un maquinón* (in Cuba cars, *carros,* are also *máquinas,* machines; *un maquinón* is a big car) likes to take his dates for a drive through the tunnel. It happens that his car inevitably breaks down inside the tunnel. And then the lights go out. The girls, *chiquitas* in Cuban slang, are wise to his trick. But instead of avoiding the underground Casanova, as soon as they get into the *maquinón* they ask him to head straight for the tunnel: "Vamos al túnel, mi vida, vamos al túnel, mi amor."

I didn't say anything to my mother about my dream car. I just stared at it in a spell, *encantado,* hoping that Nena would notice. I had begun paying attention to girls. I could see myself in that little roadster taking a *chiquita* to the tunnel.

Christmas morning. A few feet from the fake fireplace that doubles as a crèche, next to the spindly, ornament-cluttered, tinsel-laden fir, there it is! My eyes light up brighter than the tree. But the spell quickly breaks. When I approach the *cuña,* I discover it's not like the one in the store. Mine has pedals. What's more, it's too small for me, so that my legs barely fit under the hood. I drag it out to the tile patio, pedal around for a while, scrape my knees, and never get back in it. Nena had noticed my fascination with the little red car with the motor, as I'd hoped, but decided I was too young for it, though I was two years older than Anthony.

Miami, 1966

Six years after leaving Cuba, I'm in a Catholic high school on South Bayshore Drive. My early years in the United States had been happy ones. In Miami I enjoyed a newfound freedom. Not political freedom, that wasn't important to me, but freedom to roam. In Havana I didn't go anywhere unaccompanied. In Miami I walked myself to school, to the park or to the nearby Boys' Club. Some days I was happy just to explore the neighborhood with a friend. It felt like an extended vacation that would end when we returned to Cuba, a rehoming that seemed around the corner.

As I advanced through my teens, the Lebensraum shrank. The reason may seem trivial, though at that age nothing is trivial. By the time I was seventeen, all my friends either drove the family car or had one of their own, usually beat-up jalopies we called *cacharros* (pieces of junk) or "transportations" (because that was their only appeal, getting you from one place to another). I was the only one in the group who wasn't *motorizado,* motorized, our term for being able to drive yourself around. To attend a dance or a football game, someone had to pick me up. To date, it had to be with another couple. After a while, embarrassed at always leeching rides, I started going out less and less.

Aside: Inside the Pérez Family

In Miami Nena and my father adhered to a strict division of labor. His responsibility was working long hours seven days a week to put food on the table, which was difficult enough to do. Nena took care of everything else. His world lay outside the walls of our house; within them, she ruled supreme. Given our pinched economy, the division of labor made sense, but it wasn't helpful to their three sons, nothing like the

ones in the 1960s TV series that I used to watch. Lengthening exile was taking a toll on the family. Crammed into a two-bedroom duplex, my brothers and I drifted apart. I wasn't close to either of them, nor were they close to each other. My youngest brother got into drugs and never came out; the next in line dropped out of college, joined a commune in California and resurfaced years later in New York City working for the Socialist Workers Party; and the eldest, his father's namesake, entered a profession that he couldn't justify to himself. Our sister, six years younger than me, is the only one who escaped the pressure-cooker without apparent damage. Some families survive exile intact; others crack.

I've spent too many hours in a therapist's office trying to understand why mine cracked and I don't intend to rehash it all here. Suffice it to say that after we arrived from Cuba, Nena placed an invisible sign above the entrance to our house: "Los hijos pertenecen a la madre." The children belong to the mother. Years later, when in the throes of a messy divorce I wanted joint custody of my children, I heard Nena repeat her first principle of parenting many times. (Fortunately American divorce laws took a different view.) I'd like to think that had we not left Cuba, Gustavo Sr. would have removed that sign from our Havana house when his sons reached adolescence. Unlike English, Spanish segregates the chronological from the parental. Children are *niños;* your children are *hijos.* Perhaps because Nena was closer to her children than to her husband – us she could control – she looked upon her *hijos* as *niños,* regardless of their age.

When I was a senior in high school, I worked up the courage to tell Nena that I wanted to learn to drive. She replied that we couldn't afford the insurance. I said that I could get a part-time job. She countered that my job was to study. I didn't bring the

subject up again. Should I have insisted, put up a fight, appealed to my father? Of course. But I never did, I was afraid to. Go figure, which is what I did with the therapist.

Miami, 1969

Along with many of my friends, after high school I enrolled at Miami Dade Junior College. My father dropped me off for early morning classes – anything to get out of the house – and I took several buses to get home in the evening, since the campus was on the other side of town. By then I was so conflicted about not knowing how to drive that I avoided anyone I knew, even my cousin Pedrito, the only son of my favorite uncle. In my mind the driver's license separated the men from the *niños*. I was still *un niño.* When not at school, I spent my time cooped up in my room playing over fifty-year-old chess games. The Beach Boys' song could have been written for me.

The summer after I graduated from Miami-Dade, an episode of "Intermittent Explosive Disorder" (IED in therapese) precipitated a change. During my teenage years, I'd have periodic blowups. The spontaneous combustion would last a few minutes and end with a crying fit. One afternoon I was having lunch in the kitchen. My sister had made us a sandwich that I didn't like. I started screaming, overturned the table with the pink formica top, and ran to my room bawling. Mari wasn't happy with me, but she'd witnessed similar episodes before. It was not until a few hours later, when my parents came home, that I heard my mother banging on my door and demanding that I come out. In the background, I could hear my father saying, "déjalo, déjalo." Let him be, let him be.

I locked myself up in the room for several days. In the middle of the night, while Little Havana slept, I'd sneak out to go to the bathroom. Finally, on the third day, hunger got the best of me. During one of my mother's banging sprees, I slipped a note under the

door with my grievances, all of which boiled down to one thing: not knowing how to drive. After reading the note, Nena asked me to open the door. I did. Standing next to my father, she said that I should have told them what was bothering me. I should have, yes, but to this day I'm surprised that it didn't occur to them, neither of whom was cruel or uncaring (I can't imagine a better mother for a *niño* than mine), that something's amiss with a healthy twenty-year old man – un *hijo* – who spends his days in an eight-by-seven-foot room whose only window is blocked by the AC unit.

The next day Gustavo Sr. arranged for me to take lessons at a driving school. It didn't occur to me that he would teach me. This was the kind of thing he didn't do. After I had a son, I concluded that there was a difference between a Cuban *padre* like mine and the American dad I wanted to be. Dads taught their sons to drive. *Padres* took them to whorehouses, which Gustavo Sr. offered to do when I started shaving. After three quick lessons I took the driving test and passed with flying colors. To the young man I was then, parallel parking was a breeze.

A few days later Gustavo Sr. presented me with my first car, along with the stubs for the monthly loan payments of $33.35, a sum I could afford because I was about to start a work-study job at the University of Miami. It was a beauty: a 1964 white Mustang convertible with a wine-red interior and an eight-track cassette player, for which Gustavo Sr. provided several cassettes of Cuban music and one of Dean Martin singing Italian songs. I don't know why he chose Dean Martin, but I've been a Dino fan ever since.

With the Mustang, the IED episodes went away and I suspended my anti-social distancing. Bachelor life didn't last long, however. One of my first dates was also my last. I married her.

Still in Miami, 1976

In Cuba Gustavo Sr. had been *un almacenista,* the owner of a food wholesaling company founded by his Spanish immigrant father, a snub-nosed, hard-working *gallego*. In Miami my father and an American partner started a used-car business that sold "transportations" to cash-strapped exiles. G & E Motors (his partner's name was Elmer) covered expenses for a few years until it didn't. I don't know what happened to Elmer, but my father got a job as a salesman at L.P. Evans, a Datsun (later Nissan) agency in the heart of Little Havana, across the street from the Woodlawn cemetery. By the time I was in college, he had worked his way up to manager. (In light of my car troubles, the irony is inescapable.)

The Mustang set the precedent of letting Gustavo Sr. handle my car purchases. The last I bought with his assistance was a 1976 Dodge Dart. We drove to a Dodge dealership on Dixie Highway in South Miami. I liked the one with a cinnamon exterior and a white stripe running along the side. As I took it for a test drive, the salesman sat next to me and my somewhat corpulent father squeezed into the back seat. Back at the showroom we were led into a cubicle with vinyl chairs and a round table. The salesman, call him Harry, talked up the Dart. If I wanted that automobile, he said, I'd better move fast. That very day several other people had looked at it. After hearing him out, my father wrote a figure on a slip of paper and slid it across the table. Harry looked up in disbelief. Evidently it was much lower than the MSRP.

And the dance began. Harry said he couldn't possibly go that low, his manager would never sign off on the deal. Gustavo Sr. prompted him to give it his best shot. Harry left and returned a while later with an offer somewhat lower than the sticker price. My

father smiled and wrote another figure on the slip of paper. And the dance continued: skepticism, a supposed conclave with the manager, a lower offer. I didn't say a word. After what seemed like half the morning, the difference between my father's number and theirs was only a few dollars, but Gustavo Sr. made Harry take one last turn around the showroom floor. When they finally agreed on the "out the door" price, poor Harry looked like he'd just finished a marathon mambo contest.

As I was signing the offer sheet, Gustavo Sr. apologized to Harry. He wouldn't have pushed him so hard, he explained, were the car not for his son. I loved hearing him say the words "my son." Then he pulled out his business card and handed it to Harry, who realized that he'd been taken for a ride. My father complimented Harry on doing his job well and we left.

Flashback: Between 1950s Havana and 1960s Little Havana

On Saturdays in Cuba my father would sometimes take me to the *almacén* in Old Havana, a couple of blocks from the docks. I spent most of the time in the warehouse behind the offices scaling imaginary mountains composed of hundred-pound rice bags, but I knew what he was doing: getting me used to going there, training me to take over the business from him, as he had done from his father. In Miami he never took me to work, not to G & E Motors or later to what we called *el lote*, the lot. The reason, I suspect, is that he regarded his occupation in Miami as temporary, a form of making-do until we returned to Cuba and he resumed his real job as an *almacenista.* He ended his working life as a car salesman and I never saw the *almacén* again.

Miami, 1989

Fast-forward three decades. I'm forty years old, teaching at Duke University and about to be divorced over Nena's spirited opposition. My father stayed out of it, as expected, though he did counsel me outside her hearing: "P'atrás, ni para coger impulso." A near translation would be: Don't go back, not even to gain momentum. Meaning that I shouldn't cave to my mother.

The rift with her brought me closer to him. When I visited Miami for Christmas or Spring Break, we'd do *padre-hijo* things for the first time (I hadn't taken him up on the brothel excursion). A chain smoker of cigars, he'd go to the Padrón store to buy a box or two, then we'd have dinner at his favorite restaurant, La Habana Vieja (Old Havana), and afterwards sip J&B at the lounge next door, where a middle-aged Cuban lady played boleros on a piano. One evening Gustavo Sr. went over to put a dollar in her tip glass. She looked across the room at me and said, "Por lo menos hiciste algo bueno en tu vida" (At least you did one good thing in your life).

On getting home that night Nena met us in the Florida room. After making small talk about my children, who had stayed in Chapel Hill with their mother, she blurted out: "¿Tú sabes cuánto ganó tu padre el año pasado?" (Do you know how much your father earned last year?). The question made me squirm. At that point he was sixty-eight years old, still working at the lot but no longer the manager. A new generation of Miami-born Cubans had begun displacing old exiles like him. Nena turned to my father: "Tell him, Gustavo, tell him." He looked away and muttered, "Tres mil, cuatro mil" (Three, four thousand). If Nena's intention was to humiliate him in front of me, it backfired. What my father was feeling at that moment – the shame, the crushing sense of inadequacy – is

what I felt as an adolescent and young man. And it's always been about cars: not having one, not selling enough. At that moment I felt closer to my father than I ever had.

Chapel Hill, 1992

During the 1980s I purchased other cars, but still played no part in the process. I left it up to my first wife, who was always happy to buy something. I claimed that I was too busy with my work to waste time in such a trivial pursuit as buying a car. The truth was that I didn't think I was up to it. The mere idea of showing my face at a dealership terrified me; even more, having to engage with a salesman. In academic settings I've never felt out of my depth, but it's one thing to talk to a roomful of PhDs and another to sit across a table from someone like Harry.

The breakthrough happened soon after I remarried. I was still living in Chapel Hill, five minutes away from my old house, with Mary Anne and, for half of every week, my two children. She owned a two-seat Honda CRV. We needed a larger car and I decided that I had to buy it myself. The night before I visited the Toyota dealership (we liked the Camry), I had another IED episode, the first in years. As we were getting ready to go to bed, I started yelling and throwing pillows and whatever else I could get my hands on. I screamed at Mary Anne that my ex-wife took care of buying cars and that she should too. Wisely, she let me exhaust myself and eventually we went to sleep. The next morning I drove to the dealership wavering between apprehension and panic. But once I got there, something happened. I realized that I wasn't alone. I had a silent partner: my father. Calmed by his invisible presence, the salesman's feigned outrage or the ploy of confabs with the manager didn't ruffle me. The back-and-forth about price went smoothly (I adopted Gustavo Sr.'s method of writing figures on a slip of paper). Like

him, I was amiable, non-confrontational. Dancing, not disputing. When I closed the deal, the car scar had healed at last.

Durham, 1998

A few months after my son turned sixteen, I told him I'd get him a car for Christmas. I wasn't about to let my history repeat itself. Being a Southern boy and not shy like his father, David said he wanted a Jeep Cherokee. We rode together to a dealership in Durham. David picked out a red one, the same color as the *cuña* in El Encanto. The salesmen at the Toyota dealership (who called themselves "advisors") reflected its customer base: yuppies and academics (that is, men and women like me). At Morgan Motors the vibe was different. All you need to know is that our salesman's first name was Jesse. No matter. I was ready. I'd done my research – that's one thing I've always been good at – and so I had a fair idea of how much they could come down from the sticker price. As my father pushed Harry, I pushed Jesse. When at last we settled on a number, I could tell David was impressed with me, as I had been with my father. Jesse turned to David, who had remained silent the whole time, and in a mellifluous Southern baritone, said: "Your dad's a sly one." What thrilled me was not only the compliment but the appellation: Dad.

David got his spanking-new, flame red Cherokee in January. In April he flipped it on a dirt road rounding a curve too fast. The Jeep was nearly totaled. David emerged unscathed.

Chapel Hill, 2004

Equal rights. Three years younger than her brother, my daughter also became "motorized" as soon as it was legal. Her choice was a silver gray Honda Civic, which she didn't wreck.

A few years later, she's a sophomore in college. For Father's Day she sends me a box of snowcaps, our agreed-upon gift for all occasions (I hate surprises, I love snowcaps). Scotch-taped to the box was a small gift card. Though I'd never told her about my worst Christmas ever, the card's cover mimicked a 1950s magazine illustration of a shiny red roadster. Inside she wrote: "I got the manliest card I could find (to affirm your socially constructed ideas of manhood). But anyways, Happy Father's Day and thanks for everything! Love, Miriam."

Epilogue: My Last Car

Since Miriam's Honda, I've bought seven other cars (I keep count). Of the two sitting in our driveway, the late-model coupe from a German automaker qualifies as *un maquinón.* I splurged on it thinking that it might be my last car. Now I'm not so sure.

My father's final years were not happy. Not the type to retire, he worked at L.P. Evans until his mid-seventies, when he was fired. His "severance package" was a used Nissan. Too old to get another job and increasingly despondent about endless exile, he became querulous and withdrawn. If my mother asked him why he was always in such a bad mood, he'd reply with another question: How can I *not* be in a bad mood? (In contrast to her husband of fifty-plus years, Nena made the most of her old age, in large part because she believed that the grandchildren belonged to the grandmother.)

Every car I've bought, my father has been there with me. Perhaps that's why I keep trading in the ones we have and purchasing others. I need to see him. Not as the

desolate old man he turned into, but as the active, cheerful, loving father that he was meant to be. The last time I shop for a car, whenever that may be, I know that Gustavo Sr. will still be guiding my hand as I scribble a number on a slip of paper.