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English Studies in Latin America  
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## **Mathematics**

Roberto Rivera Vicencio  
Translated by James Kelly<sup>1</sup>

For César, For Leonardo

*It's Chaplin's story, Soriano. We're  
on our own, and the script goes against us.*  
—Osvaldo Soriano

...At last I managed to get it through my head that life's a bitch, a total bitch, a complete and utter bitch! Every time I appeared on Maruri, a traditional long cobblestone street in Santiago, lined with adobe houses propping each other up and spindly trees, a stone's throw from the morgue, the cemeteries and the hospitals, he found himself obliged to remind me of the fact. The old woman was complicit.

"In Los Andes, it was bitterly cold," she'd begin, preparing the ground. "I remember walking home as a girl, in my school pinny, my feet frozen like blocks of ice, jumping in the snow."

I laughed under my breath. Words like old bag, bodice and hoop skirt came to mind, mixed up with the image of a pregnant partridge pretending to be lame.

"And in Curicó dear... digging the ditches with sandals in the rain, c'mon, put some back into it," he would say, starting up, peering at me out the corner of his eye. The time had come to be serious, to tread carefully. You never knew if, carried away in the heat of the moment, he would give you a right good slap.

...I could see him there all the same, so real I could almost reach out and touch him, his sandal pushing down on the tread of the shovel, his floppy straw hat, a stalk of basil flapping behind his ear. The old man must have realised, because he let rip immediately:

"What do you know about life, kid! Nothing! I can see you now, just another jerk working as a guard at the Social Security office," then, getting into character, his mouth foaming with saliva, the roar of his voice filled the air: "Don't even think about saying hello to me. I'll call the police and get you locked up!"

Silence. That was as far as the images went, while that downtrodden tenant farmer, with his navy-blue suit and pearl tiepin, thrust himself headfirst against his shadow: c'mon put some back into it!

"Take that son of a bitch away!" he roared, pointing his finger at me.

Such was his enthusiasm that I would have let them take me away, but the truth is that when he broke off contact I didn't even have to see his face. It all started with mathematics.

"Study, damn it," came the nasal accent, "you're so damned lazy. Mathematics... it's the future..." and since it wasn't, at least not for me, suddenly, as the newspapers say, "in a confusing incident," he cut off my support and broke off contact. I didn't even mention the part about being in jail, although now I only have to hear the words "back to square one" and I can see him again from behind the bars, half way between cursing me and dancing the cueca. When it came to mathematics, however, things were different. Gradually, without me even noticing, it grew to become an obsession.

My first encounter was sheer coincidence; over in Buenos Aires I already knew all the lodging houses in San Telmo by memory. I had cleaned millions of windows and toilets, and had carted around bottles of wine and spirits, furniture and boxes filled with everything from stereos to condoms. In short, as there was nothing left to transport or clean, the Big City offered me a break in an office. It was a promising start, my salary doubled, I had regular hours and guaranteed pay, not like when those sons-of-bitches would leave me eating canned tuna for whole weekends. The difficulties arose when Cayetano Raciatti, without the slightest hint of irony, picked up an invoice and handed it to me: "go ahead son, calculate the interest for me," he said, and the shock was like being hit by a ton of bricks; there I was on the second day, still racking my brains; "how's it coming along," he asked more than once, to which I replied, sure thing, Raciatti, it's coming along swell, don't worry, as I stood up and peered around discretely. Nothing. The porteños had hidden the formula from me. I escaped to the bathroom; I remember sitting for hours, racking my brains, although the only thing that came to mind was my old teacher and the way he breathed in when he pronounced the word "capital."

Half-past five came and I made my escape; I could feel Raciatti's eyes burning into the back of my head as I searched desperately for a book, for anything, and I saw tall windows, grand one-ton pianos and even the trousers I tried on on the corner of Corrientes and Puyredón slipping away in the blue and white space of military marches, of "Don't cry for me Argentina," and I thought to myself, it's back to San Telmo for me then, to the lodging houses where the rats danced gaily on the washing lines, and for a moment I almost preferred to go to jail.

I set off to look for a young Chilean mathematician, a regular presence who spoke a little English and worked from six 'til six threading needles for a large textile company. I gave up waiting. All hope abandoned, I went to Corrientes to wallow in defeat; the street was full of bright lights and people, of cafés and smiles, like a scene posing for the camera flash. Everyone seemed to have somewhere to go and was celebrating the fact; for the first time, I wasn't jealous, perhaps out of depression, or perhaps because I already had a north: interest.

I reconciled myself with Argentina; a used car salesman from Temperley, who left me sitting in a café when his fiancée arrived, taught me the infinite subtleties of usury in return for a cup of coffee. My sense of elation, however, was nearly brought crashing to earth the following morning. Raciatti thought the interest wasn't enough, despite the fact I had divided correctly by  $365 \times 100$  for a year, but since it was monthly, it didn't add up to much, and Raciatti, a veritable bloodhound for numbers if ever there was one, called me over ceremoniously; he didn't say a thing, just sat me down in front of him, calm and serious; I prepared my defence in silence, in the end, I thought, he can stick his job where the sun don't shine, but he surprised me with a second class on usury: "Grab your pen..." he began, and that day I stayed late at the office, I could hear the words of Zita Rosa's milonga going round in my head, that it's not hunger that kills, it's hatred and envy... and I felt myself walking along the grey streets of my dear old Maruri, I heard the carts and the snorts of the horses that left the scent of melons lingering in the dusk on their way to the market, and I got as far as the Sunday mornings when, opening the only window that looked out onto the street, I heard the sentimental songs of our Libertad Lamarque and Tita Merello; then it seemed less a matter of coincidence and luck, there were jilted brides and seamstresses, and the tenements of the Echazarreta street, which could even have been those of "Olavarría" from Edmundo Rivero's milonga.

I'm no expert on tango, but something smelt of "Cumparsita," I thought, or perhaps I said it, because the landing was abrupt, like being struck by a club in the dead of night, categorical, disco music, monotonous, catchy, stupid I almost screamed and the answer came immediately:

“C’mon dad... pleeease... buy me a skateboard.”

“Not a chance. Skateboards are dangerous.”

“What!! You want me to go around on a scooter?”

“Exactly.”

“No. You can buy me one if you like but Ai won’t use it.”

“You will and that’s the end of it. Besides, it’s pronounced I, not Ai. We’re going back to Chile where you’ll learn to pronounce properly,” I heard myself say, as if the voice wasn’t my own, then this imageless silence that fills with his:

“Ai’m not going. Ai’ll stay with mu...” leaving me dumbstruck, stuck in the apartment, with the constant turumtumtumtu turumtumtumtu, an apartment that didn’t receive any sunlight but which at least had a view of the mountains, of the imposing immensity of the Chilean Andes, where you’re no longer you, but the same, the same immensity where not even your breath counts, but now somewhere else entirely as I say to him:

“I’ll have you locked up,” starting to laugh as I meet his reply of

“Ai’ll have you put in the clink for taking me away.”

And so we set off to buy the scooter without a handle, which was the best I could agree, when, in a twist of fate, which in hindsight seems anything but casual, I had to help him with his sums for homework; bad, terrible, I said to him, but dad, the teach... the teacher says... sure she does, I’ll show you, and I delved into the pages of his jotter, not without amazement, to discover that one and one still made two, in Chile and in Argentina, but also that things were different, with practical methods like the Metro and the Subte, and fast like the Hawker Hunters and Tupolevs; everything joined up, or better put, complicated, abstract like a spirit, intractable, far removed from when I used to add apples and pears and could imagine them there, could see and touch them, with the solid peace of mind that if I sell ten litres of oil to... neither the numbers nor the oil would change as I sat there looking at the drawings on the ceiling and picking my nose. To think of the old numbers was almost a relief in contrast to this labyrinth, one in which it occurred to me that even the Minotaur himself could be present; it’s much easier to lose your way than find it, I told him, listening as he

replied that no, that now there are computers and fantastic calculators, that may be so, but for me it's like walking around in a strange labyrinth where there's never a soul to be seen, not a living soul, nothing at all, like an apple even, because then we would exist too, or otherwise, well... it'd be like someone else tidying your room, or watching you in the shower, like going around on a scooter without a handle even, which isn't a reward, by the way, because your grades are terrible, but come on then, let's go, let's buy it, maybe it's rash and dangerous, complicated even, but that's vertigo for you; it vanishes so fast you can't stop to look or touch, or smell, or reflect, if in a moment's time we can be where we want to be, who cares about Chile, or anything for that matter, strike while it's hot, come on, quick, let's buy it.

"You won't buy me a damn thing. You get so worked up about everything," huffy, his brow furrowed, his lip pouted, and I tell him, look, that's not how it is, listen to me...

"Say what you like. Ai don't want it and that's that."

"Forget it. Just forget it; come on, look at me, come on. I remembered Chile was like a dream, that's all, like a street as long and wide as this one, without minotaurs and labyrinths, where we sung freely and danced like friends, just like that." And he starts to look up, smiling as he lifts his head, cocky, that porteño lilt in his voice:

"Come off it! An old fogey like you dancing?" and I replied, of course, breaking out into Carlos Vives' "La piragua," *era la piragua de Guillermo Cubillos, la piragua*, that's it come on, that's it, *era la piragua*, come on, don't be a spoilsport, *era la piragua...*

"Why did we come here then, if life's so much better over there?" he shouted.

"We're tourists, that's all. How many times do I have to tell you!" as the fibre of the music lights up his eyes and, as if on the Alameda back in Santiago, he starts to sing, *era la piragua de Guillermo Cubillos, era la piragua*, the two of us standing there on the corner of Corrientes in Buenos Aires with Santiago's Cerro Santa Lucía in front of us, Luisín Landaez on the stage, *era la piragua, era la piragua*, moving our bodies inward and upward, up high, up to where we never went, until the spell wears off and he breaks free from the crowd of curious onlookers, tearing off down the street, shouting recriminations at me as I catch up:

“Do Ai look like a kid! You’re the one that’s off your head, eh.”

And so I order a gin at the bar where I always come to put my memories or intuitions in order, that feeling I’m left with, that something coincides, a sort of hidden similarity, like a theorem starting to hold, the neighbourhood, a tango, the everydayness of the men who enter and come over to me, like disco dancers, monotonous, catchy, Chilean, yes, no, not as a security guard, in an office, that’s why I’m here, I think, no I don’t have an address book, keys yes, for work, for the building, the nickel-plated one with a notch for the apartment, and that one, I don’t know, I can’t remember, yes, it’s true, mathematically speaking, I have an extra key, but there’s no need for me to be so precise, like a computer, I could just throw it away if I wanted, yes, I know no one votes here anymore, neither bolt hole nor safe house, I’ve told you I don’t know what the key’s for, I don’t know, that’s all, as they start shouting look at this chump, tell me what it opens, damn it, as the one with an axe to grind against us Chileans steps forward, he’s already seen off ten of us, perhaps an injection will refresh your memory, go on then, take it, what does it open, why would I tell you pal, life’s a bitch, a complete and utter bitch, there and here, break his face, and he didn’t study mathematics because he hates that stable order with everything in its place, *fantastico ché*, hilarious, what a pretty sight, what does it open you miserable son of a bitch, and fortunately it opened a door of which I had no idea, the same one closed by that “confusing incident,” and there was Raciatti, it’s nothing to do with me, the padrones, held suspect for a week, it just can’t be, there must be more to it, yes, there’s more, I say, the minotaurs that now expel us towards the shabby suburbs of the labyrinth, you know the times in which we live, of course, of course I do, of course *we* know, but we can’t fathom that implacable theorem that ripped us from the Santiago of Droguett and Alegría and Teillier, that made us strange and curious, with a peculiar depth in our eyes, on route to San Telmo, the journey taking forever, because it’s hard to go places, surplus to the equation’s rigor, with that feeling of an empty stomach, of giddiness at the limits of your strength, of balance, of vertigo in the windows of the top floors, like we were flying on the skateboard.



End Notes

1 Rivera's early work is haunted by the spectre of the Chilean dictatorship and this short story told from the perspective of an exile living in Argentina is no exception. It is emblematic of the nuances and texture created by the different voices and time frames that are intricately woven throughout Rivera's prose, recalling Gotschlich Reyes' description of "literary images, languages added together to form collages that arise from the consciousness of the speakers; multiple superimposed voices of dialogues, which on occasions are no more than a single voice that remembers, orders and disperses real or foreseeable worlds that are dreamt up" (1987: final para.)

This story was originally published as part of a collection entitled *La pradera ortopédica* (*The Orthopaedic Meadow*, 1986) and, together with other pieces in the collection such as *Cerveza* (*Beer*), exemplifies Rivera's experiments with style, an aspect of his writing that presents considerable challenges to the translator. The difficulty is twofold: it is first necessary to understand Rivera's wordplays and puzzles and detect the presence of stylistic features before attempting to represent their presence in the target language. In this respect, there is a very real danger that elements of his richly textured prose will be lost in the translation process, not least because of the presence of references whose subtlety may escape the translator, and others, such as puns that are not easily reproduced, of which the clever mimicking of the Argentinean pronunciation of the subject pronoun *yo* by using a different spelling (*llo*) is a case in point. Another difficulty lies in the musical references that are woven throughout the text, since these require special treatment and must be handled on a case-by-case basis. A good example is the decision to leave untranslated the refrain from José Barros' song *La Piragua* to evoke a cultural context unfamiliar to Anglophone readers while using the title "Don't cry for me Argentina" as a means to connect with the broader historical context of Peronism made familiar to English readers by the film *Evita* (1996).

Such challenges can be a source of frustration, perplexity and intractability in the translation process but these emotions ultimately give way to satisfaction as solutions present themselves. Rivera's work shows how the art of translation is about how best to represent not only the text itself but the difference that separates, in this case, the Chilean-Argentinean historic and cultural milieu from the world of the Anglophone reader. This is ultimately what makes the act of translating this author's work so rewarding, since the translator must first take apart its intricate weave and weft before trying to recreate it in English.

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