

Collage of Memories

Leñero: How I Learned to Write¹

Felipe Garrido*

Leñero to *Ana Cruz Navarro*: Ever since I was a child, I was a great reader. My father got us used to reading a lot. What I wanted to do from the time I was young was make up stories. When readers read, they satisfy the need for living a little more. Life is very limited. People go to the movies because there they live more; they live the stories that they can't experience on their own. When they write,

authors poke their noses into many lives. I have liked that ever since I was a young man, and engineering taught me to organize and structure my ideas.

I'm attracted by the mystery of the character; the enigma of that being that I'm writing about. I know what I'm writing about the characters, but many things stay in darkness. I never know everything about them.

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Leñero to Susana Garduño: The vocation for literature is a mysterious phenomenon. You read and, suddenly, you also want to write and almost copy the authors you're enthused by. I caught the bug reading Verne, Salgari, Mark Twain. I caught the theater bug by seeing theater.

Leñero studied engineering, but he wanted to write, so he studied journalism at the same time. In 1956, the Diocesan Committee in Mexico of the ACJM (Catholic Association of Mexican Youth) organized a contest in which Vicente Leñero Otero, "a

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first-year student at the Carlos Septién García School of Journalism," won first prize with a story called "La banqueta de mi calle" (*The Sidewalk on My Street*).

A crew of workers is changing "the old dirt sidewalk that for years had been naked and forgotten . . . into an elegant concrete sidewalk." For the narrator, the fact that "the happy path that used to take us nearer to God" was about to be renovated suddenly evoked "the memory of my recent childhood days . . . , the flavor of my first prayers, the breath of my student pleas, the innocent fear for my venial sins . . . when, on the first Friday evening of the month, I used to go to confess pranks, fights, disobedience." That dirt sidewalk knew "the pulse of my faults and the repentance that always went with them. I told it before I told the priest . . . the times I fought with my brothers and sisters, the days when I disobeyed my parents, the innumerable occasions when I gave into the temptation to pull the long braids of the little neighbor girl from across the street with all my childish strength. Today, all that was going to be interred: a deluge of concrete was about to bury it forever. Another, yes, newer one would be born; wider, more modern, but without the history and without the meaning that the first one left on my soul." How to keep that past on the point of disappearing? "When the construction workers finished smoothing out the last layer of cement . . . , I crept up, and, without anyone seeing me, drew my initials in a small, shaky hand with the end of a wire."

"La banqueta de mi calle" was the beginning. Leñero was just learning to write.

MAKING A LIVING WRITING STORIES

To Agustín Monsreal

It was 1957, 1958: the years when Pedro Infante died, when López Mateos was launched as a candidate and took office as president, when the teachers declared their great national strike, when *Miércoles de ceniza* (Ash Wednesday) by Luis G. Barurto and *Un hogar sólido* (A Solid Home) by Elena Garro



were performed for the first time, when Octavio Paz published *Piedra de sol* (Sun Stone) and Josefina Vicens *El libro vacío* (The Empty Book) and Guadalupe Dueñas *Tiene la noche un árbol* (The Night Has a Tree) and Sergio Fernández *Los signos perdidos* (The Lost Signs), and Carlos Fuentes *La región más transparente* (Where the Air Is Clear) . . .

At that time, I was writing without knowing and without thinking; I used to sit in front of my brother Armando's black Remington, a tank-like machine with round keys like bottle-caps, and, with no prior planning of the theme, the atmosphere, the structure, everything that I would later learn is very important for the story writer, I would string words together on those horrible yellowish sheets of really low-grade *revolución* paper. I wrote without thinking. The story invented itself. The characters and their vicissitudes burst forth as though someone had suddenly uncovered a trash can. They were dark stories, or sad stories; small stories whose crudity shocked me afterwards and to which a redeeming spirit added a Band Aid in the form of a final moral in the style of Father Luis Coloma or Father Carlos M. Heredia, so admired at the time, and even now in my remembrances despite what the new generations might think, since they do not know—and never will—who Coloma and Heredia were, those crafters of exemplary stories during the pre-dawn of my ventures into literature.

I wrote stories without thinking, automatically, obsessively, frenetically: flogging the Remington ceaselessly from the first three-space indentation until the final period on page six or nine. It was not until that instant, like the 400-meter runner after crossing the finish line, that I began to suck in air with all due anxiety, to deflate myself finally on the chair, exhausted by the terrible effort.

Naturally, I paid no attention to advice. People recommended that I ought to ponder the topic, that I shape in my imagination the characters' psychology, that I carefully structure the story's approach, the knot, the outcome and, of course,

above all else, that I study the wise men and theoreticians of the science and art of style. And I did study them. Of course I did. I read them carefully, even underlining the paragraphs and outlining pages, but naturally, I didn't put any of the advice into practice because I was overwhelmed by my anxiousness to write, the gush that would come out by sitting down and not getting up until the end, the wonderful urge that many years ago I lost along the way but that at that time allowed me to write stories in one sitting, filed away in a yellow folder or published sometimes in *Señal* (Sign) magazine, where I got my start as a journalist.

One morning in 1958, I came across a call put out by an ephemeral University Students' Front of Mexico, which, under the motto "Freedom, Unity, and Culture," convened a First National Contest of University Short Stories. The judges were to be no less than Guadalupe Dueñas, Henríque González Casanova, Juan Rulfo, Jesús Arellano, and Juan José Arreola.

I was quite impressed by the judges and my ambition was tempted by the amount of the prizes (Mex\$2 500 for first place and Mex\$1 500 for second). But what excited me the most was the possibility of being noticed by those cultured people who already had a numbered ticket for the front rows of the nation's literature.

I hadn't even finished reading the call for the contest when I was in front of the Remington writing a short story that, as I say, was coming to me as I wrote. That very afternoon I made a clean copy in a single sitting and gave it the title "La polvareda" (The Cloud of Dust). It had a rural setting, so to speak, that of course copied Rulfo, so admired at the time. I had discovered him two years before when I was flying to Madrid to begin a scholarship at the Hispanic Culture Institute.

There, in Madrid, at the wonderful Latin American literature course given by Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, I dared to ask this Spanish scholar what place he thought the Mexican Rulfo had among the giants that he urged us to devour (Unamuno, Baroja, Azorín, Machado, Camilo José Cela. . .). But Torrente Ballester had never even heard Rulfo's name; and the disdain with which he said so made me feel from that time on humiliated as a Mexican and as the Mexican writer I was anxious to become. At the end of the course, I gave Torrente Ballester my copy of *Pedro Páramo*, but I never knew if he read it or not. The point is that at that time, most apprentice writers of my generation worshipped Rulfo like a god. And we copied him.

Two days after writing "La polvareda," I wrote a second short story. I tried to make it radically different. It was neither rural

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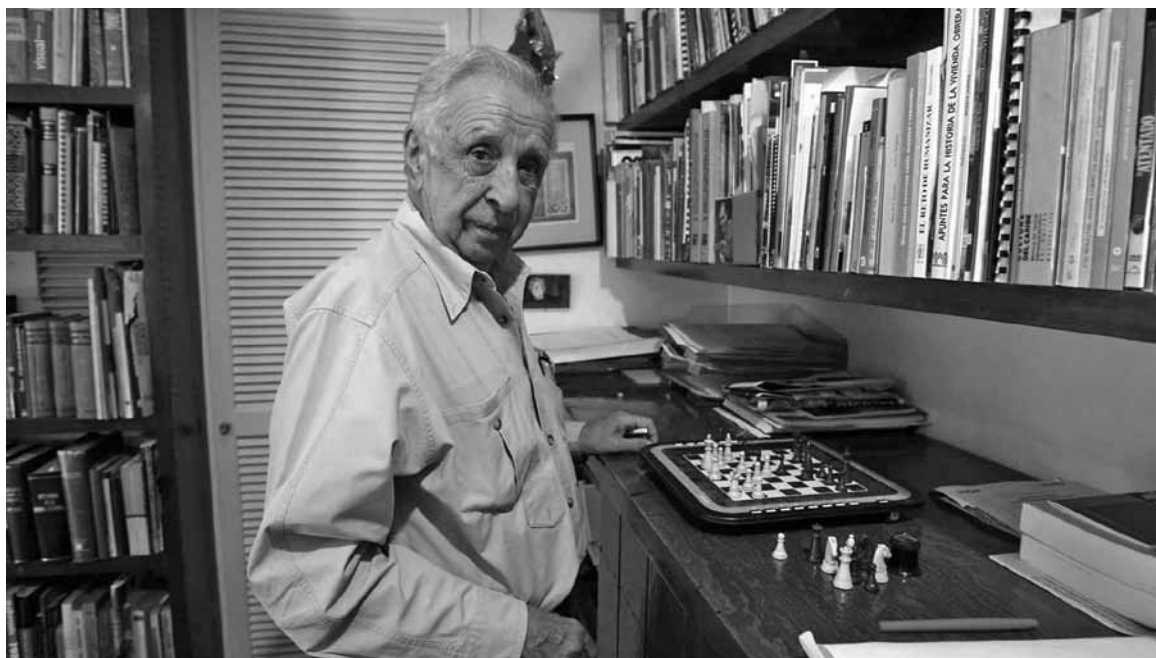
nor Rulfian. It ingenuously told the story of some rich youngsters—we called them "juniors" at the time—who stole a car, crashed it on the Toluca highway, and who had to be bailed out by Daddy. In the story, I tried to put into practice Faulkner's stream of consciousness, which I had also just discovered, and even though I didn't do it very well, it helped me escape from the influence of Rulfo. I gave it a terrible title: "¿Qué me van a hacer, papá?" (What Are They Going to Do to Me, Dad?), the question asked by the "junior" at the end, and I signed it "Gregorio," the pen name I had used to write in a high-school newspaper a few years before. To fool the judges, I typed the clean copy on a Smith Corona with tiny letters.

Written that way, with two different typefaces, and with very different themes and styles, the judges would never suspect that those two stories were written by the same author. That would give me two chances instead of one, like someone who buys two lottery tickets to double his chances.

And so it was. What had never happened to me with the lottery happened with literature: "La polvareda" won first prize and "¿Qué me van a hacer, papá?" won second.

However, on the night of the awards ceremony at the Manuel M. Ponce Room, with university President Nabor Carrillo in attendance, the president of the judges' panel, Henríque González Casanova, reported that, when he and his colleagues discovered that both stories were by the same author, they decided to give me only the amount of the first prize (Mex\$2 500) and to distribute the Mex\$1 500 for the second prize between the third-place winner, Julio González Tejeda, and Martín Reyes Vayssade, who had been given the honorable mention.

In truth, I really didn't care very much, I was in the clouds. But, at the end of the ceremony, a voice sounded out in the room. It was Rubén Salazar Mallén, who with great difficulty walked up on the stage to protest "the injustice against this young writer who wins two prizes and you only give him the money for one. It's not fair." Henríque González Casanova insisted, saying the jury was trying to encourage two other contestants, but Salazar Mallén interrupted again, not to fight with González Casanova, he said, but to announce that, since the judges' panel was depriving Leñero of the Mex\$1,500, he would



give him Mex\$500 out of his own pocket to compensate for it. And no sooner said than done, that great guy Salazar Mallén, who was anything but a rich man, brought out his checkbook, quickly scribbled the numbers and his signature, and gave me the check with a hug and many pats on the back.

My terrible lack of culture meant that at the time I didn't know who Salazar Mallén was, but from that moment on was born a solid, respectful friendship that time would only dissolve because of the complicated city we live in. Friendship from the bottom up, I must say, because I always saw him as a teacher from whom I learned important tips and who opened my eyes to the cannibalism of culture in Mexico. It was through Salazar Mallén, at his occasional social gatherings at the Palermo Café on Humboldt Street, where I later met Jesús Arellano (the poet who dared to offend Don Alfonso Reyes in public and for that was struck from the intellectual registry), the very noble Efraín Huerta, the extraordinary Juan Rulfo. . . .

"You're a prude, by the Holy Cross," Juan Rulfo used to say to me, crossing himself tongue in cheek and clacking his teeth with a sly chuckle.

He had already stopped me cold before when, in the euphoria of my double prize, I had gone up to him to say everything a young man says to an admired author: "I've read everything you ever wrote, Mr. Rulfo, and I think it's wonderful, Mr. Rulfo, and above all, Mr. Rulfo, admiring you as I do, I'm really glad you were part of the judges' panel that gave me the prize, Mr. Rulfo."

"Don't delude yourself," Juan Rulfo replied. "I'm going to tell you the truth if you want to know it. Do you want to know?"

I nodded yes. I couldn't guess his intentions.

"You didn't win unanimously. Did you know that?"

"Well, no."

"You had one vote against you and it was mine," he finished. "I didn't like that story of yours, 'La polvareda.' González Tejada's was much better."

Of course, I sought no more support or literary guidance from Juan Rulfo. I ran to Juan José Arreola.

"Be careful of Arreola," Salazar Mallén warned.

Leñero joined Juan José Arreola's workshop. His view of the great writer from Zapotlán el Grande in his home, his workshop, and his passion for chess is a delight.

I read, re-read, corrected, re-wrote and re-read again, and finally picked what I thought were my best short stories. With them all arranged in a yellow folder, I presented myself at Arreola's apartment behind the Chapultepec Cinema. He had given me an appointment at 7:30 in the afternoon, and at 7:30, I was there knocking on the door, a little nervous. He

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didn't open the door himself; Orso did, a 13 or 14 year-old kid who I identified right there as the maestro's son. A bit later, Fuensanta, about 10 at the time, his youngest daughter, appeared, and a while later Arreola himself, shaking his hands as though they were wet and swinging his untidy head, with very curly hair, as if he were a gander. I held out the yellow folder to him, but before I could get out the first sentence, he was already rejecting it with a wave of his hand with the pretext that he had to do something in his private rooms for ten minutes or so.

My hopes were very high about having, as Arreola had promised when we made the appointment, a long, severe, rewarding session with him: he would read some of my stories in front of me and point out their good points, defects, mistakes; he would then give me his overall opinion; he would tell me how I should proceed, where I should go, once he had read the rest of my texts slowly and alone.

What vain hopes! Arreola's promise might have been made in good faith, but his literary habits made him a liar. It had been a long time since he had read his students' stories by himself. He read them, when he did read them, aloud, in front of a group, and only during the hours of his workshop, the by-then famous workshop that Juan José Arreola gave in a cold garage at the Mexican Writers' Center on Volga River Street.

It took me a while to find all that out: the existence of Arreola's workshop, of the Mexican Writers' Center, of the maestro's custom of analyzing there, and only there, his disciples' work. I would be one more of those starting then. I was one from the time Orso opened the door, Fuensanta stuck her head in to satisfy her curiosity as if she were a monkey, and Arreola appeared and disappeared with the pretext of something urgent inside in his private rooms after asking, "Do you play chess?"

I didn't know what to say. I had been feeling strange for five minutes in that living room furnished only with a long line of square tables with chessboards painted on them that reminded me of the San Juan de Letrán club where my father used to go almost every day to put his rivals in check. That's

what Arreola's house looked like: a chess club. And that's was it was, in the last analysis.

"Do you play?" he asked again, arranging the pieces on the closest board.

"A little."

"How little?"

"A little. Fair-to-middling. I think I'm not very good."

He stopped swinging his gander-like neck. He looked at me with his leprechaun eyes and, smiling, said to Fuensanta, "Play one with him; let's see. I'll be right back so we can look at one of his stories," he lied.

My pride was as offended as much by having to play chess with a little girl as if he had misjudged my literary style. But to tell the truth, both Fuensanta and Orso had game. I beat Fuensanta only with difficulty, and with Orso, I only managed some shameful ties thanks to his continually having me in check.

When Arreola came back to the living room, it wasn't only Fuensanta, Orso, and I there, but also the enormous flow of friends and students who that day every week came to his home to visit, to converse, to recite López Velarde, to play chess with Homero Aridjis, Eduardo Lizalde, Luis Antonio Camargo, Miguel González Avelar. . . . Other visitors were José de la Colina, José Emilio Pacheco, Beatriz Espejo, Fernando del Paso, Juan Martínez, the beautiful Fanny . . .

The social afternoons were complemented by another day of the week in the Volga workshop: Tita Valencia, Carmen Rosenzweig, Elsa de Llaraena, and many more who got lost on the way, like *erratas*.

We learned to write by writing, listening to Arreola, and learning from Arreola.

One night, when I was taking a walk with him on Volga Street toward Reforma Avenue, he said, stopping a half a block away, "Do you know what you need to become a writer, Leñero?"

I thought Arreola was finally going to trust me with the magic key to literature.

"What?"

"You need to get rid of your second last name. You can't be a writer who signs 'Leñero Otero.' It's a horrible little line," he told me.

I went away thinking, "Arreola is nuts." But when I published my first book, I got rid of my maternal last name forever. The book (*La polvareda*) was published by Jus. It gathered some of the stories that had been in that yellow folder and others that I wrote in Arreola's workshop. It wasn't a good book, but it was the first: the one of high hopes, of enthusiasms,

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of the yearning to become a writer above all. A short-story writer, I thought.

Thirty years later: now, sometimes, suddenly, one day, I sit down at the typewriter to try to write a story and the hours go by in front of the keyboard without being able to finish the first page. I tear it out, punishing the roller; I crush it hatefully with my fist; I forget it forever, throwing it into the wastebasket. I don't know how anymore. I've already forgotten how to write a short story (July 1987).

Leñero to Susana Garduño: If I had written half of what I've written, I would have done better. Of all the novels I've written since *Los albañiles*, I would keep the last one, *La vida que se va* (The Life that Goes), where I returned to the genre of the novel after 10 or 11 years. The short story is a genre I appreciate a great deal. Writing something short can be more difficult than something long.

JUAN JOSÉ ARREOLA, THE MIDWIFE

It's not that Juan José Arreola taught us to write, but it was with Arreola, between one or another piece worked on especially so the maestro—the writer of *Confabulario*, can you imagine?—would read them aloud one night before everyone, that we learned—writing and rewriting again and again a little later—to write.

How theatrical, how fascinating, how contagious the Juan José Arreola of the late 1950s seemed to all of us who bowed before his perspective and wisdom to drink in knowledge and sensibilities. Sitting there, all attention, we were in his hands absolutely. Our stories hung and depended only on his voice, his reading capable of transforming them suddenly into something wonderful.

Along the way, he corrected words, changed punctuation, and invented tones, cadences, inflections that the original text was far from having. Reading a story well, Arreola taught us to seek out the literary paths for escaping the labyrinth of ambiguity and entering into effectiveness.

Personally, in my inner self, I owe him the luck of having escaped in time—I believe in time—from the sounds of Rulfo. But, in addition, in public, my whole generation owes him the luck of having let ourselves be inoculated with a taste for working on a text down to the last detail, of discovering that what's important for any author is finding a "how": how to say what I want to say, whatever that is . . . the theme is the least of it. I don't remember ever having heard Juan José object to an argument or an ideological position, or political content. I do remember him—and I won't forget it—pointing out mistakes in intent, in tone, in syntax. He was always on the "how" and the "how" was always there with him: in how to write each one of our "whats."

Arreola rose up in his workshop with his gander-like neck, his curly hair that I always suspected was a wig, his pianist's hands fluttering in the air as though they were branches. He rose up and recited and sang and acted.

And you learned by contagion, as I said, with the urgent need to achieve that same passion for the written word that I translated from him, from him first, and above all, from him.

My life is charged with memories of those afternoons-evenings when I learned literature and lost at chess with Orso, with Fuensanta, with Aridjis, with Camargo, with Lizalde, with Arreola himself, in the apartment/home where Arreola captivated us with impossible stories, feats of love, literary lies, bibliographic tall tales, and at the same time published our imprecise texts in the slim volumes of *Unicornio*.

It's not a matter of remembering everything, but, yes, remembering the thrill of our years of the primary school of narration, where he appeared to us like a miracle, a true literary carnival barker who for three cents sold us the elixir of art, the magic pass to a craft that for many of us continues to be our main reason for living.

Arreola the barker, Arreola the magician, the storyteller, the performer, Mephistopheles and Merlin, wizard, sorcerer, warlock, elf, goblin, harlequin.

Maestro Arreola, midwife of my generation: without you, it would have been difficult, truly more difficult, and you know it, Juan José. Without you it would have been more difficult to be born into literature. ■■■

NOTES

¹ This text was written using interviews by Ana Cruz Navarro and Susana Garduño, plus *De cuerpo entero* (Mexico City: UNAM/Corunda, 1992); *Lotería* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1996); and *Puros cuentos* (Mexico City: Editores Mexicanos Unidos, 2004).