

**OMAR PÉREZ**

**FROM CUBANOLOGY**

**TRANSLATED BY KRISTIN DYKSTRA**

*In 2002, while temporarily living in Europe (mostly Amsterdam), Cuban poet Omar Pérez began writing in a notebook. His journey began as a short professional visit that shifted into something less defined after he fell in love. Eventually the notebook became Cubanology, a book of days reflecting on three years of life at a remove from the island: “A memory of a flight, a journey, jour.” The following excerpts are entries from 2004. They include reference to the Zen center where Pérez practiced throughout his years in Europe, as well as a stream of practical realities faced by potential emigrants.*

Vrijdag 10

Up 7. Amsterdam: School. *Eerste les na de vakantie*. Summarizing my flight from Habana to Madrid: long layover, jumpy landing. Boom! Ecuadorian classmate in Schiphol: he didn't want to come back, but his love awaits. So does mine.

Next day, Vondel Park, and then sea and dunes: for the first time I take a swim in the Dutch sea. Cold tonic, so cold that I go back to my everyday tasks with fresh body & soul. Life continues.

Zaterdag 11

In *de dojo*. Some eleven people. Loic directs and asks to dedicate the day's ceremony to the 9/11 victims – not only in the United States, but around the whole planet.

I propose the Exhibition of Cuban Painters, practitioners from the Havana *dojo*, to Paul. The proposal is accepted.

Visit to Haarlem. Ken always has a good story to tell. He says he'd like to write a play using his conversations in the Tax Department. For example:

Ken: So, what can I do if the Tax Department wants to take the money directly from my clients? (It's the income tax.)

Tax Man: You put that money in your wife's account, but don't forget to pay the VTV tax through your own account.

Ken: Ain't that fraud?

Tax Man: No, as long as you pay your taxes, that's good.

Ken: So, over time I can pay off my debt using my client's payments. Is that good?

Tax Man: No, that's bad. It's profit. Then you have to pay tax with the money you owe.

Ken: Then, I have to declare myself bankrupt and claim I'm in debt. Isn't that bad?

Tax Man: That's good. You pay your debt with the loan's money.

Ken: That's good.

Tax Man: Yeah, but if you declare a debt, that makes it harder to get a loan. That's bad.

*Waiting for Godot* in an office.

We talk about *Le Droit a la Paresse* by the Parisian born in Santiago, Cuba, Paul Lafargue. Then Ken gives us a lift to the train station. Good knight.

Sunday

The category 5 hurricane is getting closer to Cuba. It's important not to complain, *niet zeuren*, get angry or lose your sense of humor. Also physical exercise and *studieren* come in handy. Concentrate on just a few things.

I interrupt this note abruptly in order to clean my pipe.

*Va bene*. On my way back home, I throw the paper away, try in vain to withdraw money using my card, buy bread, and all this is Cubanology.

--That I listen to Cuban music and work happily during my translation of the North American anthology. I prepare the artworks for the painting exhibition. I clean the house, make a phone call to one Mr. Thomas, a Spanish Caribbeanized Dutchman, who contracts helpers for cleaning, *schoonmaken*: "I don't have much, everything's short," he says in a serious voice. Well, okay. I puree potatoes with onions, mushrooms, chives and celery. A little bit of TV and off to sleep. I miss the reading of *Women Who Run with the Wolves*.

Woensdag

*Sampai*, do de dishes. Congo prayer, Dutch breakfast work. Off to school at 8:30. Something is changing in me, around me. It's presence. Prescience, the science of foresight. I know, but it's something more: ahselleraytion.

*Niente traduzione oggi*. I try to fix the plumbing on the kitchen sink. Well, after cleaning out pipes, it's clear I have to call in the experts. I quit, listen to Irakere and discover new things.

Sometimes school is indecent.

At noon, I go home. My afternoon nap helps to pause the flow of events.

I wake up, finish reading *The Open Veins of Latin America*: thirty years later, things haven't changed much. Watching some Moroccan flamenco singers closely on television in Amsterdam, I discover structural contaminations between overlapping poems in Dutch and Spanish, at the same time, with a beat.

*Bij voorbeeld*, for example,

*Het Poem, the Pum, el Poema*

*Probeert niet, Nederlander*      *No intentes ser, holandés*  
*te origineel te zijn*                      *demasiado original*

Don't you go trying, Dutchman,  
to get too original

Cristina invites me to Ardis, the Royal Zoo, to visit the new giraffe born five days ago. It's bigger than a Doberman. Mother giraffe greets us. Giraffes give greetings with their eyes and ears. Their eyes move as if winking, and their ears flick in all directions. We also visit the African turkey buzzards, or vultures, and they give us four feathers. The gorillas eat while maintaining thoroughly abandoned postures. A girl sitting by a giant window that separates her from the male exclaims, "What a beautiful stance!"

We go home on the streetcar, and I think about the book. A novel of three 100-page sections, *ongeveer*. "For the wise, few words are enough." The first volume tells of the encounter with Gaspar Guevara, an *andante* poet with *allegro*. And a character we will call Homer, poet and storyteller, also itinerant. Slang: Gaspar, a flamenco singer, without hurrying his rhymes, goes rhyming down his path through Spain, France, and other lands, where he learns an urban English: the English of advertising. Homer operates in Donne's elusive compositions: mystical gibberish: they converse in Tuscany, *terra antica* for poets, and in Provence. In Marseille, they eat at an African restaurant at the edge of the Old Port, and in Paris they attend a jazz concert directed by a Brazilian woman whose last name is Teresa. Their rhyme, *Teresa Teresa. No interesa*.

I discovered Gaspar Guevara on the day that I launched a new novel: *Into the Wind*. It was the first volume of the trilogy, "To Someone Understanding," a hundred pages stewing with

religious, social, domestic and virile passions. *L'Andría*, as the Greeks would say, about a nomadic Havana gentleman in the twenty-first century.

He reserved some passions for the feverish joy of activities that lead you down the roads of the saints. To others he dedicated great surges of yang energy, as experts would say. He would lose himself, or escape stealthily, to a variety of celebrations: carnivals, parties folkloric or otherwise, a *bembé*; or a wedding, in a Catholic church in Miramar, of an Austrian and a Colombian. There he plays bongo and sings a rumbita. Open-air concerts. Nor did he reject the crooning called *el feeling*, or what he himself described as “flamenco with no relationship whatsoever to that tradition.” A concept difficult to explain, which manifested in *romerías* with a guitar and mint tea. You could say that this gentleman is Gaspar himself, who finds his recollections in the flavors of mint and mendacity, but there is no other meaning for “expertise” in the first section of the story.

Homer will compose a short essay, two pages, about the aforementioned novel. What will happen to Gaspar inside my novel is not what happens to him within his own novel: the first is implicit, a vision of what is to come: science fiction. Meanwhile, the other novel conveys what happened inside the legendary reality. Neither this nor that. Polyfiction. For example:

Similar to the player of soccer or chess, warm by the time he reaches the middle of the game and field, one who tests an unexpected solution from a distance of various meters or moves, I write these notes. They are as uneven as I am. But suddenly, they're warming up. My name is Gaspar and for the moment I'm waiting. I'm aware that I'm inside a bunkered office by the Bijlmer prison, in a not-so-tidy Amsterdam neighborhood. How I got here, what I'm waiting for – like any other player, that's what I'm moving to tell you.

I arrived in Europe one steel-gray morning from Havana, then in flower. I had no reasons to abandon my walled city, only an impulse to set sail and stretch my frame toward other regions, like a buffalo crossing the steppe or a salmon swimming upstream.

Like so many others, I crossed the open sea with a doctored resume, a fake letter of invitation, and twenty nasty dollars in my jacket. I don't feel like describing procedures. It's the wrong time to entertain details, and I won't offer an emigrant's political explanations, much less economic ones, or any of the other chatter that humans invent in order to do what other species, supposedly inferior species, manage to do without thought.

But some nights, looking out through the open square window in my kitchen's back wall, between two large buildings, toward infinity, I had observed a star's sigh, and blinking slowly as I exhaled, as though my eyelids and bronchial tubes worked in unison, I felt nostalgia for the unknown. At the start of late spring, stretching myself, I set foot, a shaky foot, in the city adjacent to the Marne.

I'll call my friend, my smartass sometime girlfriend, by the appropriate name of Mademoiselle Savante. She was waiting for me on firm footing in her apartment. I won't say that here we managed a walk toward some famous cemetery or a residence of illustrious rubble, or that at sunset the mist from a seminal river clogged my throat. These trivialities were quickly forgotten in the little bars nearby, in cheap food troughs that don't even provide a place to sit down. Well: sitting down will cost you. And as I heard *ça va ça va* and said *ça va ça va*, the whole thing became real: I became savant, nothing mattered to me at all, and I learned how to shell and eat the nut.

Mademoiselle had a cat, not a fine cat, not fine like a grand piano, not fine like a dress with a train, just a plain old cat ... *Moche! pour quoi?* Demoiselle would get angry, too often. *Pas du tout!* She meant he was stubby, because he had no tail: his name, Tzigane, gypsy. Sounding a lot like Zidane, the soccer player. I'll add that then she and I no longer felt attraction as lovers, no pure drama. Instead we enjoyed walking arm in arm, yes, sleeping together because the spring was still too cold; there was no more to it.

And still, at times, a reminiscence, and we would curl up together: Out, *Zidane!* Out of the bed, stubby cat ... And she, now more softly, *C'est pas moche, pas non plus Zidane...*

Journals, pieces of letters, notes from newspapers interweave. Homer is a monk. At a retreat in the city of Amsterdam he meets another monk: "An expert in vacillation and in the theories, the most current versions, for accelerating the spirit." Meanwhile Gaspar has a good time in Rotterdam. He is invited to a poetry festival, garlanded in new euros and the smiling discipline that emanates from his well-earned social status. What gets written down is crucial; what happened is indispensable.

[...]

Now it's a question of Dutch. *Huiswerk: Informatie over werk*. Ethnic minorities, revalidation of diplomas, seats. *Test u zelf*, test yourself, are you flexible enough?! Dutch Curriculum Vitae:

send it, print it, turn it in. *Flexibel, economische*. Internet, mainly commercially oriented. Boring. *Werk*. Netherlands: *translator (Spaans) niet gevonden*. Listing not found. He's busy. Later. On the other hand, Barbara's new child is born. I talk to Ken; he calls for a quickie at Don Julio. Mo calls to get details for printing. *Expositie Kubaanse Kunstenaars*. A4 CD ROM.

## HANDMADE/ HECHO A MANO

Exhibition of Cuban Paintings at the European Zen Center

15 pieces for sale, and one that is not:  
Zen Monk playing *cajón*.

in a North Amsterdam bar  
O Chung's real daughter  
Chinese pumpkin belly  
behind the bar at "Don Julio"  
eyes scratched to amber infinity  
papaya boiled in agave syrup and another beer?

Not today. For every thing there is a day,  
says my friend. Hallelujah.

I'm not jealous of the mind. Solitary  
karakter characteristic, fuck it.  
Superior neither to dogs or sparrows.

The friend is Ken.

Caroline works well with her hands and creates solutions for framing and hanging. Who said that women ... ? Not me, man! *Ik ga, i go, naar de copyshop*, not the coffeeshop! 40 *kleur* posters: 60 E. *Werken met de posters. Hoe?* Take them to Cuba, distribute them, sell them. More things to take to Cuba: tools, paintings, material, charcoal, incense, needles, sewing items. Merchant sailor, A'dam.



C.V.

I was on that corner one afternoon  
it was raining.  
Yesterday at night i was looking  
at the fool moon in the garden  
i have a son and it was  
one afternoon and it was raining  
i was looking  
at the full moon in the garden.

[...]

Friday

I go to the *dojo* and then to the copyshop. Not only are the copies not ready, but they lost the CD ROM. *Hoe kan dat nou!* Sorry, sorry. Always sorry. Sorry, I'm going to school to learn sorry. Luckily, Cristina calls Han and he can make the copies: 50 in total, big and small, for just 20 euros! And the text is free! Bad becomes good. *Allah akhbar*. I am happy.

Caroline, the monk from Alicate, is already in the *dojo*.

The weather is magnificent at the start of fall: soft, relaxing rain. From cool trees the green, yellow and red leaves are falling. The temperature is right for taking a walk in shirtsleeves, if you like. Back at home I listen to Camarón: Old World! Florian calls to ask me to take care of his cat Nefertiti, just for three days. Living. What is literal is no good for anything: all is dream. Lights, rain, Danae, the Greek woman singing with the piano. Singing a Greek bolero to it.

Why do you fool yourself, brother, dreamer  
why do you burn your wings so cruelly  
Icarus, Van Gogh ... If from each  
according to his work, to each  
according to his lunacy  
the moon, too,  
take the moon literally: danger  
like a joke made in the wrong place

There's a way to have a fine touch. As in baseball, where a good hit doesn't have to go in a particular direction.

like the grape:  
growing high  
it doesn't have to get bitter  
the heights of aspiration  
have no exact zone.

Going out for bread, doing *zazen*, these things have no exact zone. And in the end, Hunger makes brothers out of all men.

Zaterdag

I go out for bread. Immigrants don't look at anyone. They go along with their head down, looking at the future, the one they already found: ah, a coin! Ten cents. To the *dojo*, *zazen*. I do what Paul requests. Then Cristina and I go to the public protest against the Balkenende government. *Museum Plein*, 300,000 people. Blessing: when the demonstration ends, the rain begins. Back at home, potato puree, the Dutch *stampot*. The afternoon is more peaceful than any other. Life, a succession of accidents comprehending all actions of the body in reality and dream. Accidental culture. Magical biological. Hey man!