

SUNY Series in Multiethnic Literatures
Mary Jo Bona

LET'S HEAR THEIR VOICES

CUBAN AMERICAN WRITERS
OF THE SECOND GENERATION

Edited By Iraida H. López
and Eliana S. Rivero

SUNY
PRESS

Cover art: *A view of Ivan Toth Depeña's Lapse (2015-16)*
on the *Miami Metromover*. Reprinted with permission.

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Chantel Acevedo

The Child Hero's Lament

"And I could not
believe that with my going I should bring
so great a grief as this."

—Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 6, line 610

My father has a bald eagle tattooed on his back. It spans his body, each wing touching a shoulder blade. The feathers curl around his sharp bones as if the bird is holding on to him. It is a beautiful tattoo. Brown flecks of the bird's body fade to white at the neckline; the head is turned, unnaturally, so that the yellow marbled eye stares out just left of my father's spine; the wingtips are delicate, the feathers there are splayed, and individual barbs can be counted.

I've asked Papi about it only twice. The first time, he pretended not to hear, just kept on sawing a piece of PVC pipe with a hacksaw, gritting his teeth as the jagged blade trembled against the plastic. So, I left the matter alone. I was ten then, and more interested in the saw than in the tattoo. When I brought it up again, not so much asking a direct question as obliquely referencing his tattoo in the hopes that he might say something about it, I was twenty-one, and sitting in his backyard in Miami, lesson plans for the Language Arts class I'd be teaching on Monday scattered on the patio table. Papi had just come into the shade from skimming the pool and his back was shiny with sweat. He stretched, and the eagle seemed to flap his wings. Papi muttered, "Coño, pal carajo," sending all his sore muscles to hell, as if he might berate them into submission.

I said, "I'm thinking of getting a tattoo as well," and he whipped around to stare at me.

"You're a teacher, Aris," he grumbled, his finger pointing to my face, holding it there for a while silently, waiting for me to nod, to show I understood. My father, Vicente Vidal, was a man of few words. He'd meant more than a simple declaration of my career choice. He'd meant to say that teachers did *not* get tattoos; the profession requiring dignity

and the kind of seriousness of purpose that came with age. The moment I took a job teaching Language Arts to tenth graders, I ceased being twenty-one in my father's eyes. "Being a teacher is like being a nun," he'd said to me, smiling, so proud of my decision. I thought Papi's image of teacherhood quaint and old-fashioned. What did he know of unruly students, of breaking up vicious, hair-pulling fights between girls in the hallways, of the humiliations of standardized testing, or of overgrown boys who goosed their teachers in the crowded cafeteria?

Papi turned toward the pool. He slipped into the water without making a splash, his body a brown ribbon, eel-like. Papi stayed underwater so long I began to hold my breath along with him, thinking, as long as I can hold out, the old man can too. Then he broke the surface, just when I had started swallowing fast to keep from taking a breath. The top of his head, all tight, silver coils, broke through first; then his back slid to the surface, and it looked as if the eagle was swimming as well, a manta ray gliding, gliding.

And just like that, he was out of the pool again, shaking his head like a wet dog. The water sprinkled my legs and papers. Blue-ink bubbles rose to the surface on my lesson plan then flattened, leaving a blurry, indigo ring. Through the sliding glass door, I could see Papi as he entered the house, turning on everything—the lights, the television, the ceiling fan—his fingers finding the switches without looking, flipping them on so that the house was suddenly bright and loud. The silk flower arrangements my mother had made the year she died fluttered in the fan-pushed air, and I thought of the Greek gods my students were studying, reminded of them by my father who brought our home to life so easily. In a moment, Papi had changed out of his swim trunks and into cotton pajama bottoms, and eased himself into the sofa cushions to watch television.

I turned my attention to my blank lesson plans. I was new at teaching, and so to compensate for the fact that my hands still shook every morning, that a single, disaffected glance from a student would ruin my day, I'd think up elaborate activities, crafty projects such as dioramas depicting a scene from *Beowulf*, or mock trials based on *The Odyssey* (essential question: "Should Odysseus have strung up the pretty maids?"). I could not justify the purpose of such lessons. The activities were time-fillers, and I knew it. Sometimes, on rainy days when my classroom took on a gray light that subdued my students, they would appear older to me, and I would talk to them about the first time I really understood poetry, how my belly rumbled with delight, with hunger, how Emily Dickinson was right—the top of your head really does come off! And I'd have them

for a moment, attentive for once, as if they'd shed those twitchy, lithe bodies at last. Then, a cell phone would go off, and one of them would say, "Ooh, you're in trouble now." There would be laughter, a growing vibration among them that would soon erupt in shouts and dancing and jumping if I let it. "Okay, okay. Let's do some popcorn reading," I'd say, and they would groan, and take turns reading from a textbook, calling out, "Popcorn, Yusleysis!" when they wanted someone else to read, and it was great fun, but it had nothing at all to do with poetry.

I turned my attention to my work. The lesson plan templates spread out before me were empty. I'd been working with my tenth graders all semester on *The Aeneid*, and we'd just reached Dido's suicide. It was going to be tricky. Eva Vargas, a pretty softball player in my class found her father dead in their living room that summer, a blooming wound on his chest from where he'd shot himself. She'd walked in with her boyfriend, Ryan Lefkowitz, the only non-Cuban student in the school, and he'd covered her eyes and dragged her out of the house. Now Eva lived with Ryan and his family, her mother having left her and her father a long time ago. Sometimes, during class, I'd catch his hand on her upper thigh, his long arm snaking underneath his desk to reach her. Always, I'd feel a tug of curiosity. Did they share a room? What would become of them after high school? I knew too much about my students. I was an intruder in their colorful lives.

How to handle Dido's death? I didn't want a repeat of the September fiasco, when we'd read "Sonny's Blues," James Baldwin's short story about a heroin-addicted man and his brother, and Virginia del Toro collapsed in her desk, slid out of it like a wet towel falling off a slick counter, and began to sob. How was I supposed to know Virginia's brother was a recovering addict? Later, she'd had his name, Ramón, tattooed in gothic script on her calf. At the very end of that story, the addicted brother, Sonny, plays piano, and a cup of scotch, set atop the instrument, seems like "the very cup of trembling" to the narrator. I couldn't get that line out of my head as the assistant principal came into my classroom, bent down with a grunt, and carried Virginia off in his arms. She wailed when he lifted her, and the sound gave me the shivers, like I was the cup of trembling. Virginia's breakdown was the fault of my poor planning, my poor handling of a delicate subject. What a stone I was around the neck of these students' education. What a pity that they were stuck with me. These were the things I thought as the assistant principal took Virginia away, her howling echoing down the long stretch of hallway. My students' eyes were wide, unblinking. We left Baldwin's story there. I didn't mention it on the midterm.

I struggled with the "Students Will Be Able To" blank on the plan template, SWBAT for short. What could I impart on the death of Dido except to say that she immolated herself unnecessarily, that all that burning flesh did not deter Aeneas, as her dark, Carthaginian eyes were set on the wine-colored sea, on the white, full sails of the Trojan ships. This part of the story always reminded me of my mother. After the first stroke, she begged Papi to go to Cuba with her, to help her down the aisle of an airplane, to carry her luggage full of goods for their family there, to hold her up as she set foot on the island for the first time since 1962. Papi had yelled, "¿Pa Cuba? I won't spend a dollar there. ¿Me oyes? Not a dollar!" and Mami's eyes narrowed, her mind churned and strained, almost as if she were calling forth another stroke, one to show him she was serious. When she fell ill again, this time weakening her right side, too, Mami again asked Papi to secure passage to Cuba. Again, he said no, and bared his back to show her the eagle. When she became quite sick, sick enough to know her fragility would not be undone, she whispered to me, "Ay m'ija, when it's over, he'll see that he is wrong. He'll see." But Papi and Aeneas are a lot alike. Aeneas did not turn the ships around, even after he saw the smoke of Dido's pyre.

SWBAT what, exactly? Feel the keen sting of Dido's loss? Maybe identify irony in the scene, how Dido turned Aeneas's sword on herself before the flames consumed her? The voice of my college advisor, Dr. Alice Forti, was in my ears. "Show them the poetry of pity! Tell them about Virgil's subversions!" and then, "Aris, I told you, you belong in a library, not a classroom." A gust of wind lifted the empty lesson plans up and sent them into the pool.

"Damn it," I muttered, then picked out the pages with the pool skimmer. It came to me then, an idea for the lesson. I'd have students act out the scene. We'd make a bier out of the beanbag chairs, I'd buy a toy sword, we'd . . .

"¡Aris, ven acá! ¡Mira esto!" my father shouted, interrupting my thoughts. Inside, Papi was on the edge of the couch, his elbows on his knees, and his hands over his mouth. His skin had erupted in a million bumps, and the hairs on his arms were raised. The television was set on Telemundo, the Spanish station. On screen, an unsteady camera was capturing a small group of paramedics as they strapped down a small boy to a gurney. The little boy's eyes bounced side to side, glancing here and there, as if astonished at the hubbub around him. Papi and I listened as the reporter tried to make sense of the scene. The boy was a Cuban rafter, a balsero, rescued at sea by a pair of fishermen. "How did he survive? ¿Así, tan solito?" Papi asked, and I heard how his voice quivered

a little. I should have recognized it then, the power of the moment, how my father had already claimed the boy as his own, and one of the tribe of Cuban exiles.

It would turn out that the boy, Elián, had put to sea with his mother, Elisabet, her lover, and ten other refugees off the coast of Cuba, from a town named Cárdenas. That their raft had broken up. That Elisabet could not swim. Later, Elián would claim that dolphins kept him company, that they rubbed their slick skin against his legs and squeaked at him, buoying him, their clicks cheering him on. Everyone knows the rest of the story, the tug-of-war that followed. It played out in the news, in parodies on TV, in rallies of thousands on both sides of the Florida straits.

That year, Elián's picture would be everywhere. My father would purchase a poster at the ten-cent store in Little Havana, of Elián holding a life-sized statue of the Christ child at Christmastime. The two were strikingly similar—Jesus's face, and Elián's both registered a look of bewilderment, a tension in the eyebrows, rosy, baby lips. Papi tacked up the poster in our dining room, which embarrassed me so deeply that I couldn't even look at it.

At night, I dreamt of Elisabet. I couldn't shake the thought of her clinging to the side of an inner tube, her little boy lying across the top, a bird in a nest. Again and again, I had visions of her death, of her wrinkled fingers slipping off the side. Sometimes, I dreamt of bull sharks circling her pale legs.



Much later, Papi and I had our first fight over Elián. I'd never yelled at him before, not even during my angsty teenage years when I listened to Pearl Jam's "Black" on a loop, driving my father crazy. Even when I'd not been allowed to go to prom with Jesse Peña, and Papi had said, "Not without a chaperone!" then refused to pay the eighty-dollar ticket to accompany us. Even then, I didn't argue with him.

But in January, three months, after Elián had been rescued and the custody battle was reaching a shrill, painful pitch, I told my father, "He should go back," meaning Elián.

Papi jumped a little, patted his chest as if I'd just shot him, then asked, "Are you crazy?"

"He has a father!" I'd shouted, thinking he'd understand, thinking he'd imagine himself alone, without me.

"You disappoint me," Papi said, and now it was my turn to recoil.

Later, at dinner, I said, "I want you to be proud of me, Papi." God, I sounded like a child. I can feel my cheeks burning now as I remember it.

"Then, tell your students what the news cannot about the boy," Papi said, and stabbed his steak so hard the whole table rattled.



My father's dictum repeated itself in my head the next morning, "Tell them what the news cannot," and it was like the stabbing sound of a bugle in my head, like in old war movies, the trumpet blast that precedes the charge. I unlocked the door to the classroom, and my students brushed past me, moving me out of the way, light as I was, to tumble into the desks I'd arranged in rows the night before, their big, awkward bodies pushing the desks out of order already, the aluminum legs screeching against the linoleum. The kids were loud, raucous, no matter that the morning was still young, that the air was still cool outside, the dew still beaded on the windows. In one corner, René Guzmán was twirling a strand of Luz María Prieto's curly hair around his pencil, and she, sleepy-eyed, relished the gentle pull on her scalp. The twins, Paulina and Jessica Cabrera, had dragged their desks together to form a broad writing surface, and they had spread out their notes on *The Aeneid* from the day before, their penmanship matching, their dark heads drawn together to whisper about the chemistry exam next period. Playing the clown, Fausto Figueroa was standing on his desk, the hem of his shirt in his right hand, rotating his pelvis in big circles and rubbing his hairless, round belly with his left.

I cleared my throat. I said, "Guys. Hey, guys," but there was no change, except for the looks on Paulina's and Jessica's faces, a downward, disapproving turn of their lips. I banged my copy of *The Aeneid* on my desk, which was met with a sudden silence, and then a communal groan.

"I hate that story," René said, releasing the pencil from Luz María's hair. She whimpered. "It's, like, Aeneas, go home already, dude. We know how it ends." There was laughter at this, as was usual when René spoke. Even I laughed a little, thinking this boy would grow to be a powerful man, the kind of man women had to be careful around, less they lose themselves in him.

"We aren't talking about Virgil today," I said, and there were shouts of "Movie day!" and "Free time!" so loud that I had to bang the book against my desk again. "No, no," I said, "current events."

"Not Elián," Johanna Rodriguez said from the back row. Her hair was pulled back that day, and for the first time, I noticed that her eyes were a yellowish kind of hazel, pretty, even under fluorescents. She had spoken from behind her fingers, which she'd been covering her face with, only her eyes and the tip of her nose peeking out from between them. Johanna

wore plastic rings on each finger—a black skull on her pinkie, a silver ankh on another finger, and so on. Those rings clicked all through class, though Johanna herself rarely made a sound.

"It's like, Elián, dude, go home already," René said again, louder, secure that this time the laughs would be bigger, which they were.

"I need to tell you what the news cannot," I said, parroting my father's morning advice. It sounded strange to hear myself say it, and the way the kids looked at me, I could tell they thought it strange, too. But they were silent for once, leaning forward, attentive. Paulina pressed the tip of her pen to a page, Jessica following a moment later. That's when I realized I had nothing to say about Elián. My thoughts had gathered on his mother from the start, away from the boy.

"How about," I said, thinking as I spoke, "how about a story. Forget Elián," and I lifted myself onto my desk, careful to tuck the ends of my skirt under my thighs. "Dido and Aeneas," I said, "remember how they went into that cave?" and my students nodded. Luz María turned around to say something to René, but I snapped my fingers at her, which made her jump and face forward again. "Juno sends a storm, and Dido and Aeneas flee into the dark cave," I began, and was lost then, explaining how Dido, spellbound, quivered in the dark, opening herself to Aeneas on an outcropping of craggy rock, the skin on her back tearing in jagged strips as her love took form, became a blunt thing, not quite solid, but nameable at last, and she captured him for her own. I went on, elaborating on Virgil's story. I told them how the nymphs, unused to such mortal pleasure, heard Dido's cries and they called out to Juno in their anguish and fear. Such happiness, the nymphs knew, would bring nothing but heartache. How the braver nymphs, the ones that loved Dido, sought to approach the sound, thinking if they reached it, they could shut it off.

I stopped then. The light in the room had darkened as a morning thunderstorm rolled in. Before me, the class was silent. A few of the girls had their hands clutched against their faces, under their chins. Luz María's cheeks were flushed. There was uncomfortable shifting all around.

"Why isn't shit like that in here?" René said, waving his book in the air. Thank God, the tension cracked, and students laughed. The bell rang, and they left me in a rush. I shouted homework at them, knowing they hadn't heard, or that some of them had, but would pretend not to have noticed. Their leaving was always a hard moment for me, that joyous abandonment of our time together, as if the hour had been punishing. I had a planning period next, and settled into my desk, a stack of quizzes before me. The first cheered me up. It was Fausto's quiz,

and he'd answered the question "Why does Aeneas leave Dido?" with a drawing of a turtle in a toga, a bow in his hand, the arrows in his quiver dripping blood.

So, that day, I didn't mention Elián at school. The truth was, by January, they were sick of him. At twenty-one, I was only six years older than most of my students. If my father's diatribes concerning the little balsero's custody were wearing on me, then, I imagined, my students had parents at home doing the same thing. We were second-generation exiles, my students and I, and were weary.

That night, my father asked, "Did you tell them?"

I was in the kitchen, watching the valve of our pressure cooker spit and spin, the smell of garlic and beans in the air. The pressure cooker made me nervous, and I was lost in thought as I watched it, imagining an explosion of beans and aluminum pot, and me ducking to avoid the worst of it.

"What?" I asked, drawn out of myself.

"Did you tell them? About Elián."

"I did." In a fashion, this was true. I'd told them about Dido, about a woman that fell so recklessly in love that she risked her nation. Dido, whose real name was Elissa, was so much like Elisabet, Elián's mother, who had fallen in love, had followed her boyfriend down to the seashore, her small son on her hip. Like Dido, that act of submission had killed her.

"What did you say?" Papi asked, and he sounded so hopeful.

"That Elián should stay, of course. Freedom and all that."

"Bien," Papi said, and turned up the volume on the television. He smiled through dinner, and afterwards, he fetched the car keys, jingled them in my face, and announced we were going to Little Havana, to Elián's house. "So you can teach your students, Aris. So that you have a first-hand account of what's going on," he said.

Papi settled into the driver's seat, and I reminded him to put on his seatbelt. His hands caressed the wheel, rubbing the vinyl up and down. Then he turned on the engine. We glided quietly down the short blocks of Little Havana. The homes were small, tile-roofed, and many were flanked by mango trees, which were just beginning to burst into flower. Tiny, hard buds of mango flowers littered the road, and I could hear our tires crunching over them.

"The INS says he has to go back," Papi said. Then he laughed a little and whispered, "No way, José."

"And all the Cubans in Miami are going to stop the INS, how?" I asked.

"You have no faith," he said. "I believe it will work out. This country always makes the right choice."

"Always, Papi?" I asked, thinking about his tattoo again. I knew a little about the tattoo, knew he'd gotten it in La Cabaña prison in Cuba during the twenty-one months he spent there after being captured at the Bay of Pigs. He'd come back changed, my mother had said. He was thinner, more wrinkled, his back a used canvas, a sky, for a trapped bird of prey. She said, "Tu papá ya no es tu papá," and tapped her forehead with her finger, meaning that more than his body had changed, but I couldn't tell the difference. To me, he was only the man I'd always known—not unlike the bird on his back, a fierce creature, but tender like the bald eagle, which cares for its fuzzy, adorable young in pairs, like proper mamis and papis. I had a hard time picturing my father with a gun in his hand, training first at the Homestead Airforce Base in Florida, and then, at Fort Benning, Georgia. The idea of my father in Georgia boggled me. I'd watch him as he fingered limp avocado seedlings in the shade of our backyard, his thick fingers rubbing the leaves as if his touch was what gave them their sheen, and I couldn't align what I saw with the image of him out in a Georgia long-leaf pine forest, the crunch of dry clay under his feet, feet that were accustomed to the mush of swamp, of moister earth, of the floating sensation of island life.

How strange that gun must have felt to him at first. We never talked about it, of course. He didn't speak of the Bay of Pigs at all, pretended it didn't happen. And yet, whenever we went to the beach, he'd ask me to spread sunscreen lotion on the tattoo, protecting it from the intensity of the Miami sun. He'd hum as my hands passed over his back, and here and there, I'd see his muscles twitch, as if I were bringing the bird to life. My father's hands were calloused from yard work, though I imagined long months of gun training left their marks, too. When I was younger and held his hand, I wondered which of the hard bumps on his palm were leftovers of that long-ago violence, and which were made by shovels and our push-mower.

"Always," Papi answered my question, and parked the car. The street in front of the small house where Elián was staying had taken on the quality of Mecca—crowded, and yet surprisingly quiet. Some people gripped candles. Cuban flags were held up, and they flapped and curled then flapped again in the stiff Miami breeze. We parked a few blocks down, away from the television crew vans. Vendors had set up their wares here and there, mainly bottled water and paper cones filled with salty peanuts.

I followed Papi through the crowd. His big body broke through easily, and he said, "Perdón," again and again as he pushed forward. There, we joined a long line of people who were holding hands and swaying, their

eyes on the small wooden door of the house. Crosses had been hung from the chain-link fence that kept us out of the front yard. A picture of Elisabet had been framed and hung, too. Flowers rested underneath the photograph. Every once in a while, someone would come and touch the picture, so that the glass was smudged from fingerprints, creating a haze over her shiny skin, her thick, brown bangs, her thin lips. The smudges made her look ghostly and undefined. A rosary dangled from one corner of the frame. When one of the Venetian blinds inside the house parted a little, the crowd let out a gasp.

"You think he'll come outside to play?" one of the people there wondered aloud, pointing to a wooden swing set in the side yard of the house. "El Parque de Elián" was painted in black letters onto the top beam of the swings.

My heart was pounding. I, too, stared at the door. I thought of Ascanius, Aeneas's son, the boy Dido had loved as if he were her own. The child hero. And I wished suddenly for an epic to be written about this, a long poem that would start on a shore less than a hundred miles away. I would teach it to my students, and they would memorize parts of it, would design posters of their favorite scenes, would put on a play.

Then, as if the force of my imaginary classroom called him forth, René Guzmán appeared before me, gripping the hand of a little girl wearing a red sweater. Pinned to it was a small Cuban flag made up of many small, plastic beads, dangling from a safety pin. "Hey, Ms. Vidal," René said, and leaned forward to kiss my cheek. It was a thing all the students did with all the teachers. Later, when I moved up north, far away from the tropical breezes, from the yellowing posters of Elián that still hung in homes across Miami-Dade County, I'd miss their sweet kisses, their warm familiarity absent from my American students in New England, whose tempers were colder, like the air that swirled off that icy coast.

Papi turned to René. "One of yours, Aris?" he asked, and pounded René's back with his palm. "Your teacher is my daughter, can you believe it?" he asked, and had that proud look in his eyes, one he wanted René to return.

Ever the charmer, the boy did, and said, "Ms. Vidal's the best." Beside him, the girl in the red sweater turned the toe of her sneaker into the earth, making a round divot. She worked hard at it, and the tip of her shoe began to disappear in the dirt. "This is my sister, Maylín," René said, and the child looked up at me and smiled. Her eyes were large, frog-like nearly, and startling in their greenness. She glanced away from me and toward the picture of Elisabet, and her face froze.

I was going to say something to René then, suggest that perhaps he

take Maylín home, away from this, when the door creaked open. The crowd around us thickened as Elián and his pretty, older cousin came out to greet everyone. Maylín was swallowed in the rush of bodies, and I heard René say, "See ya, Ms. Vidal!" as he disappeared with his sister back out onto the street. Behind us, cars rolling by began to stop, tried to maneuver better viewing positions. Horns blasted, shattering the quiet of the place. I felt a hard thing at my back, and turned to see the heavy equipment of a video camera behind me, a reporter in a pressed suit tried hard to push me out of the way.

Papi yelled, "Niño, niño, your mother didn't die in vain!" and I wanted to cover his mouth with my hand because Elián looked so startled at the sound of my father's voice. Were all child heroes this terrified at first? Did Jason, riding on the back of the centaur Chiron as a boy, tremble in fear? Was Atalanta, left to die in the wild, afraid of the bear that nursed her? That's when I heard it, an awful wail—high-pitched, young sounding. At first, I stared at Elián, wondered how he'd done it. How had he screamed in terror without opening his mouth? Then my senses righted themselves, and I turned to the back of the crowd, pushed past them, and burst onto the street, where René was sitting, holding Maylín's limp form in his arms.

"A car," he was saying, his voice choked, and I noticed then the girl's foot, mangled and blackened, her sneaker torn away from her body, the tip of it still covered in dirt, and now, blood, too. My hands flew to her chest, which rose and fell still, and I cried out along with René, "Help! Help!" but it was as if we were alone, sitting in the shade of television crew vehicles and a hundred bodies tuned only to one point, to another child.

"Papi!" I called. When I was little, I could whisper it, "Papi," and he'd come rushing from wherever he was as if his ears heard my special frequency. But this time, my father had not heard. I stood and saw that he had climbed over the chain-link fence, had removed his shirt, and was showing his tattoo to Elián, who touched the eagle with his fingertips. His little mouth open as my father spoke to him.

I took Maylín into my arms then, and whispered in her ear about doctors, and making her well, and her big brother, who'd taken off in the direction of one of the camera crews and had gotten ahold of a cellular phone. I heard some singing then, two songs at odds with one another. To the right of Elián's house, a group of elderly women had begun to sing "Oh, María," and in a car down the block, someone was blasting the beginning sounds of the Cuban anthem, a rapid-fire series of trumpet that preceded the first verse. I looked for Papi again, and now he was

holding Elián up on his strong shoulders, the boy's little legs curled around my father's neck. The child wasn't paying attention to the flashes of light from the cameras, light that glinted off my father's white teeth. Instead, he was running his fingers along the wet gutter over his head, pulling down soggy mango leaves.

"Turn around," I could hear one of the photographers say, and my father did, showing off his tattoo.



The ancient Greeks associated the eagle with Zeus. The birds were his ready omen, sent down to frighten the mortals with its aerial acrobatics. The bald eagle can fly upside down, so that the sky is beneath him, and he above it, not unlike the gods somewhere out there in the atmosphere. It is thought that the eagle mates for life, but it isn't true. If things aren't working out, if the breeding pair doesn't produce offspring, if one of the birds dies, the one left behind finds another mate and doesn't look back at the massive ball of twigs and feathers that was its nest. Of all of the eagle's attributes, this is its best. To leave and not look back, to be able to make a white page out of one's memory, white like the feathers on the eagle's head. I don't think my father knew any of this when he let a fellow prisoner tattoo an eagle on his back. God knows where the tools came from, or the ink, and it's a miracle in itself, not that my father was returned to the United States, traded by the Cuban government for a fleet of tractors, but that the open wounds on his back did not become infected, killing him slowly.

Maylín lived, of course, and a few months later, René reported that she walked with only a small limp. Elián was taken from Little Havana on Easter Sunday by a squad of SWAT team members, became for my father not the child hero of my imagination, but a sacrificial lamb. I left Miami that summer, pulled away from the tropics by an assistant dean of students job in New Haven. Now, when I teach the classics to my prep school kids, I don't feel Dido's pain as keenly.

My favorite scene is this: when Aeneas sees Dido's shade in the underworld, she ignores him, despite his pleading, and so he twists away from her, forgets her, and turns north.

Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas

Bird in the Hand

Excerpts

Scene 1

[Felix is Cuban American. He begins to tell us about being eighteen in Miami.]

FELIX

I look back at my story the way a tourist studies a cheap map. I'm trying to remember how I got from Point A to the point called The-Man-I-Am-Today. You would think there would be a line I could draw. You would think I'd be able to re-trace my steps.

Let me rewind.

Point A was the place I grew up: Florida. Maybe you don't care, but just so you know, people actually have to grow up in Florida.

So back at Point A, my father was this immigrant. Now thing about immigrants is they're prone to clichéd behavior. So it's like my father was compelled by evolution, you know, to set up a "small business." Except instead of setting up something normal like a corner store or a shop that sold religious statues, I mean even a medical supply outlet would have been acceptable—but no. My father went and opened a theme park. For the tourists. Bird Land Family Theme Park. He even did these commercials which everyone in my high school made fun of where he'd use his thick accent and say, Come and see my birds of the tropics.

I was so traumatized by this that I developed a mild case of Stockholm syndrome and so I ended up getting a job there. The tourists would waddle in with their lobster sunburns and their unflattering shorts and I'd tell them the story of how—better yet, let me show you.

The flamingos were the main attraction, i.e., they were over here.

[A flamingo squawks.]