

# Susurrus

A Literary Arts Magazine of the American South

issue nine

summer 2024



## Going Back to Miami

by Gustavo Pérez Firmat

---

The first thing you see from the window is a quilt of rectangular pools of blue-green water carved out by the limestone quarries. As the plane descends further, you notice the terracotta roofs of the Spanish-style houses, neatly grouped into dry-docked islands. As you are about to land, the plane barely clears the curling expressway, or so it seems. Soon after you feel a thump when the wheels hit the runway. After you “deplane” (a verb I wish didn’t exist) and before you retrieve your bags, if you have any, you stop for a *cafecito* at the Versailles stand near the gate. Then you walk or ride the Skytrain to the car rental facility, pick out the one you want from the row of compacts, twist and turn your way out of the dark automobile warehouse, take a left out of the airport and a quick right onto Douglas Road. Once you go over the low white bridge that spans the canal, you say to yourself: “I’m home.”

But are you?

For most of my life, Cuban exiles have nurtured a special attachment to Miami, which we baptized “la capital del exilio” (the capital city of exile). Substantial Cuban communities exist also in New Jersey, Los Angeles, Tampa, and other places, but only in parts of Miami are you immersed in the scents, the sounds, the tastes, the colors of Cuba. I’m lying awake at a hotel in Miami and Cuban voices float in the air. The same thing happens when I’m in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where I live. The difference is that in Miami the voices sound not only in my head. I heard them earlier that evening ordering dinner, leaving the car keys at the entrance to the hotel, going up the elevator.

For those of us who left Cuba as children and haven’t gone back, Miami is the only Cuba we know. For exiles of my parents’ generation – an all but extinct human species – Miami was the only Cuba available. In Little Havana, Westchester, and Hialeah they encountered not only businesses that bore the familiar old-country names but ways of speaking and habits of social intercourse that had not survived on the island because of the changes wrought by the Revolution. For countless Cubans in the United States, the place of exile became more dear than our country of birth. The absence of the original made the heart grow fonder for the copy. And with time the copy became the original.

I’ve been going back to Miami for fifty years. *Se dice pronto*, as a Spaniard would put it. Easy to say but hard to cognize. During the first half of the half-century, I’d return whenever I could: Thanksgiving, Christmas, Spring Break, weddings, baptisms, summer vacations. Back in the 1980s, the city’s slogan was “Miami’s for me.” Its Spanish version was: “Miami me llama” (Miami is calling me), a take-off on the title of a Cuban song. I answered that call often. Resisting assimilation, I had become one of those “unmeltable ethnics” that Michael Novak wrote about. As I approached middle age, the melting began. And now, in my seventies, I think of myself, like one of the characters in James’ *Portrait of a Lady*, as assimilated yet unconverted. I’ve adapted to life away from *mi gente*, my people, and even grown to like some parts of it, but I retain an unmelted and unmeltable core.

I arrived from Cuba on the cusp of adolescence. In Miami I attended middle school (at the time, “junior high”), high school (we called it “bachillerato”), community college (at the time, “junior college”), and

college. I didn't *feel* like an exile, though of course I knew that we had left Cuba for political reasons a year after Fidel Castro came to power. Most of my family also lived in Miami, and my friends and acquaintances, even some of my teachers, overlapped with those from Cuba. My third grade teacher in Cuba was my high school Spanish teacher in Miami. Almost everyone you met knew or knew about someone you also knew. Instead of six degrees of separation, two degrees of intimacy. Other than in school, I didn't have much contact with Americans. And in the Catholic schools I attended, about half of the students were Cuban. It was exile at home.

I moved away from Miami two weeks after I married my first wife, another Cuban whom I'd met at the University of Miami. Our destination was the University of Michigan, where we hoped to earn a PhD and go back to teach at a university in or near Miami. (Why Michigan? Because the doctoral program at the University of Miami turned me down, probably because they knew me.) Riding in the van that took us from the Detroit airport to Ann Arbor, for the first time I felt like an outsider, someone who has lost his place. Up in Michigan, everything was unfamiliar and it didn't become less so during the five years I spent there.

My wife, who had lived in Boston, was prepared for the winter coats, mittens, scarves, woolen socks, and ear warmers. I wasn't. Trudging in the dark through the snow to teach an 8 a.m. class of beginning Spanish, I thought that hell had frozen over. The human climate was not much warmer. At the time Castro was the darling of many in Academia, especially in Latin American Studies, and being an opponent of his regime didn't endear me to the activists among peers and professors. Speaking with my dissertation advisor, I once spoke critically (that is, truthfully) of Castro's totalitarian bent. His response: "I'm very touchy about Castro." *He's touchy*, I thought. But it's not politic to get political with the guy who's supposed to help you find a job (which he did), and so I kept my mouth shut. Later I found out that the only time he had been to Cuba was as a tourist in the 1950s. Maybe he'd had a bad experience at the Tropicana.

Shying away from awkward interactions such as this one, I spent most of my days and part of my nights in the Harlan Hatcher library, which was great for my career, not so great for life, and made me the victim of a nasty prank. During my last year as a graduate student someone broke into the locked carrel where I was working on my dissertation. The thief took a year's worth of notes and drafts. After an excruciating week during which I tried to reconstruct my dissertation from memory, everything was returned – along with a b&d magazine featuring "Bianca, Mistress of Pain" on the cover – in exchange for a hundred dollars and several items of women's underwear. I never discovered the identity of the culprit, though it must have been someone who knew me. I shared the carrel with another doctoral student and her materials were left untouched.

Limited by meager TA salaries, we returned to Miami twice a year, for Christmas and during the summer months. As I drove down I-75 in our beat-up Pontiac with the balky ignition, the heart of America could just as well been the heart of darkness. I always worried that the car would break down in the middle of nowhere, which it did at least once. Born on a small island, I had a difficult time grasping the immensity of this country. The distance we covered in a one-way trip from Ann Arbor to Miami, some 1400 miles, was nearly enough to go from one end of Cuba to the other – and back.

By the summer before our final year in Ann Arbor, we had saved enough to put a down payment on a new Dodge Dart. To save wear and tear on the car, we took the Auto Train on the way back to Ann Arbor. The first time we took it in for an oil change at the local dealership, the manager of the service

department accused us of tampering with the odometer. He contended that the mileage was too low for a car bought in Miami. I didn't know an odometer from Adam, but I had the receipt for the train. No dice. It took the intervention of the Better Business Bureau for the dealership to agree to service our car. If Miami was for me, Michigan definitely was not.

Back home – I mean, in Miami – we stayed at my mother's house. It was my father's too, but I thought of it as hers because within those walls she reigned supreme. My parents had an understanding: she didn't seem to care what my father did when he wasn't home (mostly he spent twelve hours a day, seven days a week, selling used cars to cash-strapped "refugees," as exiles were known then), as long as he let her run the household, which included her four children, the teenage son of friends who had not left Cuba yet, and two grandmothers who didn't speak to each other because each believed that their child had married the wrong person (they may have been right).

Even so, I couldn't wait to go back to the house where I'd spent my adolescent and college years. My bedroom, improvised by dividing the Florida room with three tall metal closets, was intact. The water-stained Hemingway poster that I fastened to the false ceiling was still there. When you walked in, a bearded Papa glared at you. Most of the glass louvers still didn't open, which didn't matter, since the window air conditioner ran day and night. My mother and Rosa, who had always gotten along, liked being under the same roof, as might have happened in Cuba. In fact, with time I came to realize that my mother was fonder of Rosa than I was.

After finishing at Michigan we moved to Chapel Hill, where we had lucked into teaching positions at neighboring universities not so far from Miami. We returned as often as we could to receive injections of "Cubanicillin," as a friend of mine phrased it. If we left Chapel Hill at the crack of dawn, we'd arrive at my mother's house by nightfall. I-95 was a long umbilical cord tying me to the motherland. When we had children, the trips became all the more frequent. Both Rosa and I wanted our children to grow up Cuban and see themselves as members of an extended family. And in Miami we had free babysitting services from my mother, who was always happy to take care of her first grandchildren so that we could eat out, go to the movies, or shop at Dadeland Mall, Rosa's idea of heaven (mine too, I must confess).

A month after David was born, we bought a house in Chapel Hill. Before leaving the apartment where we had been living, I removed our name tag from the door. On the back of the card, in pencil, someone had printed, "GO HOME SPIC." For all I know the slur had been there for the three years we occupied that apartment. But that didn't bother me too much (sticks and stones...). What made an impression was that the bigot wanted for me exactly what I wanted for me: to go home.

When my son was two years old, after his morning nap I would take him in his stroller to a small lake near where we lived. We'd sit by the edge of the lake and look at the ducks. One day as a flock of birds went by, he pointed to them and asked me in Spanish, his only language at the time, where the birds were going. "A Miami," I said. To Miami. Our little family was like those birds: on our way to Miami even when we weren't. In Chapel Hill we held our breaths. In Miami we breathed. I couldn't wait for the holidays of respiration.

This state of the union lasted for ten reasonably happy years. Then something happened: I fell in love with Mary Anne, who isn't Cuban. I wanted a life where I lived rather than where I didn't. Chapel Hill air was breathable too. One thing I liked about Mary Anne: she knew next to nothing about Cubans, as I knew much less than I thought about Americans. She was I-75 made flesh, friendly rather than

forbidding. In her eyes, I was Ricky Ricardo with a PhD. She wasn't enamored of my volatility, what she called my "lightning-quick switches in mood." The rest of me she liked well enough.

---

**"For countless Cubans in the United States, the place of exile became more dear than our country of birth. The absence of the original made the heart grow fonder for the copy. And with time the copy became the original."**

---

Little by little I stopped seeing Miami as motherland: Mami and Miami in one. Living in Miami, I waited to return to Cuba; living in Chapel Hill, I waited to return to Miami, where the people I knew were still waiting to return to Cuba. Without fully realizing it, I had gotten stuck in a kind of protacted adolescence. Even after I had children, I didn't shed the still-life typical of exiles, though I realized that American-born children made me more than an exile. But not everyone grows up when they're supposed to. I didn't. It's embarrassing to admit this, but sometimes I think that I turned twenty-one on my fortieth birthday.

My mother was not pleased by my change of life. Nena (as everyone called her) and I had always been of one mind about most things, but what economists call the "coincidence of wants" finally collapsed, perhaps twenty years too late. Having fed on roots long enough, I was eager to branch out, look forward rather than back. Other Americans had joined the Pérez family before, but as husbands or sons in law, which meant that the close-knit circle of Cuban women, the family's anchor and ballast, held steady. By marrying Mary Anne, I was breaking up this charmed, charmless circle. It took Nena a while, but eventually she called an end to the hostilities. She remained close to Rosa, who my mother said was the only person who understood her, but she was affectionate toward Mary Anne, even if she once called her a *puta* to my face (thankfully out of Mary Anne's hearing) because we lived together for a couple of years before tying the knot. I think that what sold Nena on her American daughter-in-law was the love and care with which Mary Anne treated her grandchildren, in elementary school at the time (Mary Anne's were already grown). For her part, Mary Anne gladly absorbed Cuban customs and more Spanish than she's willing to acknowledge.

The old routine of spending Christmas at my mother's house with David and Miriam continued for several years. Those were good times, to be sure, but the festiveness was muted, at least for me, by the increasing number of no-shows. Like economies and balloons, families go through cycles of expansion and contraction, and in the 1990s ours entered a contractive phase. Some of us, the younger ones, had moved away from Miami and did not make it back for Nochebuena, the traditional Christmas Eve celebration that, years earlier, had brought the whole family together. Others, the older generation, had begun to pass away. Of my favorite uncles only one was still alive, and he was beginning to *chochear*, which is the gentle way of saying that he was showing signs of dementia. Eventually Tío Pedro ended up in an institution after trying to strangle his daughter.

When Mary Anne and I returned to Miami with David and Miriam for several weeks in the summer, we rented an apartment across from the University of Miami so that the children would have access to a pool. If we weren't at the pool or visiting my mother or watching the manatees drifting in the nearby canal, we spent our days doing things that we didn't do in Chapel Hill. On one memorable evening in the early 1990s, we attended a Miami Sound Machine concert. Miriam slept through most of it on Mary

Anne's lap, but preteen David, who had a Gloria Estefan poster in his room, joined the conga line snaking up and down the aisles. The rhythm was going to get him, and it did. I was delighted.

If it was racing season, Gulfstream Racetrack was the place to be. I'd give David and Miriam \$20 each so that they could bet. When I was a child my father did the same with me. On Sundays, before winter baseball had started, we'd go to the Oriental Park racetrack in Havana and he'd hand me a few *pesos* to put on the horses. At the time I had no inkling of his proclivity to gamble, as I had no idea, many years later, that my son was following in his grandfather's footsteps a little too closely. Still, I loved those summer afternoons at Gulfstream: the raked brown dirt of the track, the pond and palm trees at its center; the picturesque names of the horses; the mysteries of the racing form; and the excitement on the rare occasions one of us picked a winner.

Several times we'd have lunch or dinner at one of the many inexpensive restaurants in Little Havana and stop at one of the bakeries in the area. I've never been to an American bakery, if they exist, but a Miami Cuban bakery, even to the initiated, is a house of delectable wonders. The centerpiece is a long display case divided into several sections. One section will hold *los dulces*, the sweets, which range from varieties of *flan* (egg, cheese, guava, coconut) to *brazo gitano* ("gipsy arm"), a kind of jelly roll, to *tocino de cielo* ("bacon from heaven"), which has nothing to do with bacon and everything to do with sugar: it offers the sweetest taste this side of a diabetic coma. Not to mention the impressively named *napoleones*, *marquesitas*, *capuchinos* and *señoritas*. Another section contains an assortment of finger sandwiches, including some filled with a paste made from ham, cream cheese and garlic (believe me, it tastes much better than it sounds). A third section displays the pastries – *pastelitos*, *cangrejitos* and *empanadas* – grouped by contents: meat, chicken, chorizo, ham, cheese, guava, or some combination. In the same section, neat rows of *croquetas*, the *pièces de résistance* at any Cuban birthday party. Behind the case, against the wall, aromatic loaves of Cuban bread, made in the back of the bakery, are piled on the shelves. Finally, a tall case in a corner exhibits the cakes, which – truth to tell – look and taste no different than the ones in the supermarket, except for the ones with the outline of Cuba on the icing.

The bakery we preferred was Gilbert's, at the time on Douglas Road, not far from my mother's house. We'd go in and ask for *una cajita*, a little box, and the lady behind the counter would want to know for how many items. We'd say "eight" or "twelve," depending on whether we were returning to the apartment or stopping by my mother's house first. While Mary Anne and I selected ours, David and Miriam argued over the rest. We'd be sure to come away also with a few cellophane packets of *merengues* (Miriam's favorite) and *goticas* (little drops), crispy cookies shaped like Hershey's Kisses. (In Cuba the tiny size of the cookies did suggest drops; in Miami the *goticas* swelled – everything is bigger in America – but the diminutive remained.)

Another required stop was a record store on Eighth Street called Do-Re-Mi, where David got his Gloria Estefan poster. I would stock up on records and CDs of Cuban music, whose cost I'd charge to my research fund, since in theory I went to Miami to do research. I still have them, hundreds of them, though streaming has made them obsolete. They take up a big chunk of what used to be David's room, but I can't bring myself to discard them. Unheard, they constitute the almost literal "record" of those years when David's room was actually David's.

Our most frequent destination was, of course, the beach. Key Biscayne, a narrow barrier island just off the coast of Miami, ends in a triangular strip of land whose official name is Cape Florida. Years ago Cubans baptized it "El Farito" because of the small lighthouse (*farito*) at its tip. Since the cape had been

owned by José Alemán, a wealthy Cuban politician who bought the property in the late 1940s, the renaming obeyed a certain historical logic. As you'd expect, at the time Alemán was living in exile in Miami. He constructed a seawall in the part of the cape that fronts Biscayne Bay and replaced the native vegetation with Australian pines. In 1966 Aleman's widow sold the fifty-acre property to the state of Florida. By then other Cuban exiles had begun taking ownership once more, this time by occupation. In the early 1990s a hurricane blew away the Australian pines, to the conservationists' delight and my chagrin, but El Farito remained.

On any given day in the summer it became the temporary home of Cuban families who seemed to have moved all of their belongings to the picnic area between the parking lot and the beach: from domino tables to pork fryers, from boom boxes to bongo drums, from cots for the grandparents to *corrales* (playpens) for the toddlers. When not at the beach, we'd rent pedal cars and ride around the cape, sometimes stopping at an inlet on the other side of the beach that served as an anchorage for sailboats. There we ate our bag lunches or hamburgers we purchased at the grill by the lighthouse. (Cuban-style picnics, exhausting as they are, were never my thing). Every once in a while, on a particularly lucky day, I'd witness the fashion shoot of a beautiful young model on the beach.

It was at El Farito, during the *balsero* crisis of the mid-1990s, that David and Miriam received a lesson in living history. One morning, as they played in the water, a dozen or so men and women in damp rags emerged out of nowhere and walked ashore. Their arrival was not unexpected, since ICE officials had a bus waiting for them. In those days, the so-called "wet foot-dry foot" policy allowed any Cuban who reached U.S. soil to receive asylum. Once the *balseros* got off their rafts and stepped on the fine Farito sand, they were here to stay.



The 1990s came to an end for me in the Spring of 2002, when my father died. My mother moved in with my sister, a single mom who lived in Memphis. The Miami house went to my youngest brother, who lost it to foreclosure. Since by then David and Miriam were busy with their own lives, Mary Anne and I began

going to Miami by ourselves. We usually stayed in an apartment in or around Coral Gables. For groceries we shopped at the Publix on Lejeune Road. I enjoyed going there, though it was often dirty and always chaotic, because of the familiar faces. It seemed to me that any of the people I saw could have been one of my aunts or uncles. For toiletries we relied on the Navarro Pharmacy on Miracle Mile. The name tags of the employees, who were all Cuban, noted their home towns: "Sara, Sagua la Grande"; "Olga María, Las Tunas." In a small island like Cuba, where you come from says almost as much about you as who your parents were. This quaint detail made me feel that I was among people like me: home folk.

It was during this period that I first heard three fateful words: *No lo parece* (You don't look it). I lived in Miami for thirteen years and nobody said to me that I didn't look Cuban. Neither did it happen while I was married to Rosa. But with Mary Anne at my side, I got this comment at the car rental, at movie theaters, stores, and especially in restaurants. It annoyed me not to be recognized as one of the locals. If the Cuban waitress at La Carreta spoke in English as she handed us the menus, I'd quickly reset her customer guidance system by asking in Spanish about some typical dish like *rabo encendido*, an oxtail stew whose name translates to "tail on fire." She would glance at me and say: "¿Usted es cubano? No lo parece." (You're Cuban? You don't look it.)

A paleface made even paler by my aversion to the outdoors (nature is fine when observed from a distance in a climate-controlled room), I don't fit the stereotype of the "brown" Latino, and Mary Anne tips the scale against my fungible nationality. As someone once told me: "Usted suena cubano pero no parece cubano." (You sound Cuban but you don't look Cuban.) At one time I believed that when I reached what Spanish calls euphemistically *la tercera edad* (old age), I would start to look like my father, about whose Cubanness there was no mistaking. But no. Instead of looking like *un viejo cubano*, I look like an old geezer. A recent incident added a new twist. A Venezuelan man I met in Miami asked where I was from. I said, as I always do, *soy cubano*. He was surprised. According to him, I looked Venezuelan.

In *Altogether Elsewhere*, Emil Cioran writes that no one can keep his griefs in their prime. What's true of griefs is no less true of joys. Throughout my academic career the subject I've written about the most is Cuban literature. The University of Miami houses the largest archive of Cuban materials outside the island, a collection that I've often had occasion to consult. When Mary Anne and I went to Miami by ourselves, we'd spend part of each weekday at the Cuban Heritage Collection, where we worked on one of my projects. My research assistant by marriage helped me find the items I was looking for, took notes, and copied or xeroxed many a document. The many hours in the library, where I was surrounded by Cuban things, provided a professional reason for the trips to Miami and a routine for us to follow.

Five or six years ago, as I was nearing retirement, those articles and books had been written and I'd had enough of academic projects. Without something concrete to accomplish in Miami and without much family to see, I found myself at loose ends, not a good situation for a tightly wound man like me. As I drove around the parts of the city where I grew up, it seemed to me that I was touring a graveyard. I'd say to Mary Anne: that's the efficiency where Goyita, my grandmother's sister, used to live; that's the house Tío Pedro bought after Tía Ampa died; that's the hospital where Evelyn's husband went for chemo. I'd also drive by my mother's house. It struck me as an empty tomb, even though people I didn't know lived there. Often we went past a real cemetery in Little Havana, across the street from the car lot where my father worked for thirty years. Mary Anne and I had walked through the Woodlawn years earlier. I had read that Desi Arnaz's father was buried next to Gerardo Machado, a former president of Cuba, and I



wanted to verify that it was so (research, again). Going by it now, the cemetery reminded me only of my father, who isn't buried there because he was cremated and my mother kept his ashes, or so she said.

Even sites that had no mortuary connections gave rise to these feelings: the building where my dermatologist had his office; the intersection where David ran a stop sign; the high-rise that replaced a bowling alley called the Coliseum where I went as a teenager. New buildings like the pastel-colored high rise evoked the same wisdom embedded in centuries-old ruins: nothing lasts. Anytime we drove by a familiar location I pointed it out to Mary Anne, as if to prove to myself and to her that this was still my town. But it wasn't. Even something as commonplace as making a wrong turn deflated me. When that happens in Chapel Hill, where I've lived much longer than I ever did in Miami, I may worry about my lucidity but it doesn't impinge on my sense of self. After all, I'm a Cuban from Miami. But if I still were one, I'd know to avoid Dixie Highway during rush hour. And I'd know when the Coliseum was torn down.

---

**"I looked upon Miami as a ghostly city whose Cuban character derived not from the men and women who lived there but from those who had died there, the city's truly permanent residents."**

---

In *The House of the Seven Gables*, one of the characters says: "There is no such unwholesome atmosphere as that of an old home, rendered poisonous by one's defunct forefathers and relatives... It were a relief to me if that house could be torn down, or burnt up, and so the earth be rid of it, and grass be sown abundantly over its foundation." That's how I was starting to feel. I looked upon Miami as a ghostly city whose Cuban character derived not from the men and women who lived there but from those who had died there, the city's truly permanent residents. The Cuban actor and comedian Guillermo Álvarez Guedes captured Hawthorne's sentiment in the title of one of his movies: *A mí que me importa que explote Miami*. (What I do care if Miami blows up.) That's what I thought, not only about Miami but sometimes about Cuba itself.

Then the pandemic struck, and we didn't travel to Miami for two years, the longest I'd ever been away. After we resumed our trips, I felt more ill at ease than ever. Watching Spanish-language TV in an apartment in South Miami or going for a walk along Miracle Mile, I didn't know whether I was glad or sorry to be there. The sensation that I was visiting a graveyard came back stronger than before. I still needed shots of Cubanillin, but the cost in melancholy retrospection nearly outweighed the benefits of being around Cubans.

A year ago, while planning another trip, a different approach occurred to us. Instead of going back to the area where the ghosts dwelled, we decided to stay in Key Biscayne. Not being around Coral Gables or Little Havana kept the nostalgia in check. We could foray into the city if we wanted to, but I was less tempted to root around old haunts. I've learned that in Miami when I take a walk down memory lane, no less congested than Dixie Highway at rush hour, I end up regretting it. Too many bumps in the road. Too many horns blasting. That trip and the one that followed established a protocol that minimized the cost without forsaking the benefits.

The hotel in Key Biscayne is only a few blocks from El Farito. We drove through it one afternoon but didn't linger. It took me a long time, but I've reached a new understanding with myself. Rather than regarding trips to Miami as homecomings, I compare them to running into a high school friend you

haven't seen in years. After a few minutes of reminiscing, you realize that you have nothing else to say and you part ways warmly but expeditiously. Rather than going to Miami for weeks, we go for five or six nights. Less than that, I don't have time to settle in. More than that, I get restless and want to leave. Miami's still for me, provided that I embrace the limitations of our relationship.

I get the life-enhancing shots of Cubanillin by spending an evening at a friend's house or chatting with people I come across. In Miami I do something I've never done elsewhere: start a conversation. It can be with another couple at the hotel, or the bagger at the grocery store, or the lady in the sundry shop. Of these exchanges with other Cubans, one sticks in my mind. During the first trip on our new plan, I got to know the middle-aged man who put up the umbrellas and handed out towels at the beach. Once I heard him mumble a couple of words in English, I could tell he was Cuban. I told him I was too, which of course surprised him (*no lo parece*). His name was Luis, he hailed from Santa Clara, a city in central Cuba, and had arrived in the United States only a year and a half earlier, more than sixty years after I did. He was hoping that his seventeen-year-old son, a member of the Cuban National Ballet, would go abroad with the troupe and defect. "Mi hijo me necesita," he said. My son needs me. He was saving money to get his wife and mother out of Cuba.

Luis didn't hide that he was not a happy man. One morning he said to me: "Termino de trabajar, me voy a mi casa y no hay nadie. Sí, extraño mucho, pero no por el sistema, el sistema no sirve. Por la familia. Para mí la familia es lo más importante." (I finish work, I go home, and there's nobody there. Yes, I miss Cuba a lot, not because of the regime, the regime's no good, but because of the family. For me family is what's most important.) On our next trip, three months later, Luis wasn't there. I asked the young man who had taken his place, also Cuban, what happened. He said that Luis had been fired after getting in an argument with the boss, *el americano ese*, and he pointed to a man in the stall.

At the hotel where we stay a Cuban band (that is, a band of Cubans) plays on weekends. When Mary Anne and I were younger we'd go dancing at Miami clubs with names like "Mystique" and "Desirée," the sorts of places with glitter balls and fakeleather sofas. But the music was great. Then age and the reggaeton caught up with us. Other than an occasional spin in our living room, we hadn't done a rumba walk in years. Now we're back on the floor. My American wife, who for some mysterious reason was born with Cuban hips, sways with the best of them. I'm no slouch myself. Dancing at the hotel to *sones* and *boleros* I've known since I was a child, I can drink to my liver's discontent, stumble upstairs, take Advil for the creaking joints, and plunge into bed looking forward to going back home, to Chapel Hill.

---

**Gustavo Pérez Firmat** was born in Havana, Cuba. He was educated at Miami-Dade Community College, The University of Miami, and The University of Michigan, where he earned a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature. He taught at Duke University from 1978 to 1999 and is currently the David Feinson Professor Emeritus of Humanities at Columbia University. He lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Among his books of literary and cultural criticism are [Saber de ausencia](#) (2022), [A Cuban in Mayberry](#) (2014), [The Havana Habit](#) (2010), [Tongue Ties](#) (2003) and [Life on the Hyphen](#) (1994). He has also published several collections of poetry in Spanish and English, as well the memoirs [Next Year in Cuba](#) (1995) and [Cincuenta lecciones de exilio y desexilio](#) (2000); and translations of the poetry of Spanish poet Luis Albert de Cuenca in [My Favorite Monster](#) (2024). His translations and imaginative writing has been published in [The Paris Review](#),

[\*Ploughshares\*](#), [\*The Southern Review\*](#), [\*The Carolina Quarterly\*](#), [\*Michigan Quarterly Review\*](#), [\*The Baltimore Review\*](#), and other journals. Visit his website [here](#).

---

Copyright © 2024 Susurrus, A Literary Arts Magazine of the American South.

All Rights Reserved.