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## Island of Bones

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# Island of Bones

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# Island of Bones

*Essays*

JOY CASTRO



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*For Virginia, Rosie, and Dolores*

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*Pero es difícil differentiating between  
lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto.*

— GLORIA ANZALDÚA,  
*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*



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# Contents

- 1 Island of Bones
- 11 What My Mother Told Me  
When I Found Her
- 13 Clips of My Father's House
- 17 Turn of Faith
- 20 Getting Lost
- 23 In Theory
- 27 Farm Use
- 36 Hip Joints
- 47 No *Más* Monkey
- 50 Edging
- 54 Fitting
- 59 The Athens of the Midwest

68	You Can Avoid the Mistakes I Made
70	An Angle of Vision
80	Grip
82	Getting “Grip”
89	Hungry
93	On Becoming Educated
102	Vesper Adest
106	“¿Quién es ese Jimmy Choo?”: <i>A Latina Mother Comes of Age</i>
123	GRATITUDE
125	SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
127	NOTES
131	BIBLIOGRAPHY



## Island of Bones

### HOME

The anthologies don't mention us. When I teach Latino studies, I have to take supplemental materials into class so that students know Cubans existed here in the United States before 1959.

In the public narrative of Cuban immigration, the narrative we most often hear and read, we're told that, fleeing Castro's revolution, the very "*first* wave of Cubans, approximately 250,000, arrived from 1959 to 1964"—emphasis mine—as Guillermo Grenier writes in his study of Cuban American exile ideology. Two other major cohorts swiftly followed—all of them middle and upper class, highly educated, and professional—before the poorer, less skilled Marielitos arrived in 1980. According to this narrative, moreover, Cuban Americans lean right: they vote Republican, since ousting Castro's regime is the primary factor that motivates their politics and also since they're well-to-do and want to protect the wealth they brought with them or earned, once on Floridian soil, through their industry and thrift.

But this narrative erases an earlier succession of small waves of nineteenth-century Cuban immigrants—not political exiles, but

people who came to the United States in search of work, like economic immigrants who come from Mexico and Central and South America today. By the 1890s, half the population of Key West—Cayo Hueso, the isle of bones—was Cuban, including *mi familia*, who had begun emigrating there from Cuba in the 1870s. Over the decades before Fidel Castro came to power, the Rolo and then the Castro family ran the Spanish-language printing press on the island. My family belonged to a working-class community of skilled and unskilled laborers, and its ties to Cuba were strong. National Airlines, for which my father would eventually work as a skycap, ticket agent, and then manager, ran flights to Havana from 1946 to 1961. Before Castro's revolution, my grandparents went back regularly to reconnect with relatives.

But Cayo Hueso is a small island, its Cuban history a small history that has mostly been erased from our national memory by the dramatic convulsions of the revolution, the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, little Elián and Janet Reno. Key West's own status in the public imagination, like the status of most Caribbean islands, is simply that of resort playground.

#### MONEY

Between 1959 and 1979, most of the Cubans who came to Florida were well-to-do middle- and upper-class people frustrated with the communist takeover, and they were welcomed here as good capitalists. Within their cultural productions here in the United States since then, Cuba shimmers like a lost Eden of servants, mansions, pleasure, and beauty. It's a vision that wealth-loving Americans have been all too happy to endorse. Carlos Eire's memoir *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, for example, which won the National Book Award, opens with his family members referring to themselves as French royalty while they frolic among their heirloom furniture and porcelain, unaware of the impending revolution. Mary Urrutia Randelman's cookbook *Memories of a Cuban Kitchen* is laced with photos of her family's

fifteen-hundred-acre tobacco plantation, their fourteen-thousand-acre cattle ranch (granted by the king of Spain), members of her family at the Havana Yacht Club, and her laughing parents, sailing off Varadero Beach. In her detective novels, Carolina Garcia-Aguilera deploys the common cultural stereotype of the Miami Cuban who dunks buttered Cuban toast in his coffee, bemoaning his exile twenty years after the fact, and whose yacht is pointed toward Havana, ready to go as soon as the radio proclaims good news. In her recent autobiographical one-woman play *Rum & Coke*, Carmen Peláez waxes nostalgic about her family's lost wealth and privilege. I sat in the audience wanting to puke, wondering, *Is this the only story Cubans know how to tell? I can't connect with these people.*

Neither can my aunt, my only relative (out of dozens) who still remains on the island. As a librarian at Key West High, she can barely afford to live there, now that it's been chopped into resorts for the wealthy. All of our other relatives have moved north.

When I was in grad school in Texas, I asked her why she didn't move to Miami.

"Ugh," she said. "Too many Cubans."

At the time, full of youthful hubris and new paradigms from ethnic studies, I diagnosed her with a sad case of internalized racism. Later I learned that, like my father did, and like I do, she leans left politically and that "Cubans," to her, signifies the right-wing Cubans who dominate the news, the post-1959 Cubans—angry, well-to-do, horn honking, and proud of their passion—and not the Key West Cubans she grew up with, not her family and friends. The dominant media coverage has erased her own story—even for her.

My family members are a little socialist, honestly, but not in a very political kind of way. We're mostly poor people, workers, cleaners of other people's houses, grocery checkers, cops. *Ranchos* and servants don't really do it for us. We'd like economic justice, yeah, but we don't quite know what to do about it; most of us aren't exactly reading Marx and Engels on the weekend. We're just kind of skeptical of

the capitalist metanarrative, the way most poor, working-class, and lower-middle-class workers—or people who grew up that way—are.

We're sure not waxing nostalgic for a Cuba where we were only poorer, where none of my great-aunts bought dresses at El Encanto.

We weren't part of El Movimiento. We lack a political identity. "I'm just a Conch," says my aunt, referring to the term for Key West natives.

With property values on the island the way they are, there are almost no Conchs left.

#### NOSTALGIA

A conch shell sits on my *altár*. My dad gave it to me. (I never called him Apá; he made us use English at home—another source of Latino identity, busted.) He used to dive for conchs as a boy. He used to shimmy up coconut palms and throw the coconuts down. When we were children, he'd crack them open and let us drink the sweet, thin milk.

He committed suicide in 2002. I still wonder what part loneliness played. For decades he pursued the American Dream, moving wherever the job required, working to assimilate, laughing off the way white people compared him to Ricky Ricardo: Miami, London, West Virginia, a man with only a high school education trying to play in the white-collar world with just his silver tongue and smarts. It worked for a while, until his age caught up with him and suddenly every entry-level applicant had a degree, and he watched his career spiral away as he sank from a small-time airline executive to a collection agent to a census taker, walking door to door in rural West Virginia, watching out for dogs.

His suicide ruptures the myth. Latinos, history tells us, don't kill themselves. They nobly sacrifice and organize like Chávez or take up arms like Tijerina. They're heroes, like Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. Call them Joaquín. They labor and sacrifice; they boss their

wives and children; they *endure* for the sake of *familia*, for *dignidad*. They do not go gentle into that good night.

But my dad did. No macho, he washed dishes and fried eggs and died alone in his Chevy.

Tidy, my stepmother said. The bullet hole was barely noticeable. He died with his eyes closed. He looked sad, she said, as if he'd been sleeping and was having a sad, sad dream.

#### G O D

Latinos are Catholic, or so goes the narrative, and Latinas are particularly devout. Our hair is choked with the smoke of copal and candles, our homes plastered with images of saints and *la Virgen* and the sacred heart of Jesus.

But my *abuela* in Key West, with her seventh-grade education and four kids and exhaustion (plus a slew of the neighbors' children to watch for extra money), opened her door on Elizabeth Street one day to a Jehovah's Witness, and boy, didn't it all sound good: paradise on Earth, starting any minute now (as soon as Jehovah wipes out the wicked—and you *know* Aunt Poni's gonna get it, the way she carries on), and everybody getting a big, nice house with a landscaped lawn like in the pictures in *The Watchtower*, and all your kids behaving for once, and no racism, and everybody with enough to eat and new clothes and equal in the eyes of the Lord. Just like that, she threw off generations of Catholicism and orishas and dragged her kids out of Mass and straight to the Kingdom Hall, and that's how they grew up. My aunt Lettie even married an elder. My dad, who'd been an altar boy, gave talks from the stage about Jehovah, and when he married a pretty National Airlines stewardess, they held the ceremony in the Key West Kingdom Hall.

My brother and I grew up not with saints and candles, not with Oshun and Yemaya, but with a squeaky-clean Jesus, dreaming of the tigers we'd have for pets (as soon as Armageddon hurried up and got here) and preaching door to door.



I left the Witnesses at fifteen. As an adult, I tried the Catholic Church, but higher education had already excised my tolerance for dogma, so I settled, like many academics, into a secular agnosticism, spiritual-but-not-religious. I might chant, meditate, and pray—but not *to* anyone. Why I felt the need for a rosary, which dangles over my desk, or why I mutter the Hail Mary when planes take off is anyone's guess.

On the wall by my desk brood images of the Virgin: la Virgen de Guadalupe, Cuba's Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, and Spain's black Virgin of Montserrat. But they weren't the ones I prayed to growing up.

#### LOOKS

I have brown hair, brown eyes, and light skin. Growing up, it was always, "Ay, qué linda," and, "You look just like your father." My aunts are light skinned, too. *Mi prima* Jeri has blue eyes, and when she gets highlights, the pale streaks look natural. In Miami, where people know that Cubans span the color wheel from black to blond, it's not an issue.

But heritage doesn't always translate visually. Here in Nebraska, I was waiting outside the yoga studio the other day. A guy from my class was also waiting: a Chicano. He asked how things were going.

I told him how happy I was with the Latino studies class I'm teaching this semester, and he drew back in surprise.

"No disrespect," he said, "but what qualifies *you* to teach Latino studies?"

*Other than a PhD?* I wondered. But I explained my background.

"Oh. Oh, sorry. I know some Cubans," he said, "and you don't look Cuban."

Then I pointed out that if he takes Latino studies seriously as an intellectual discipline, identity shouldn't be a prerequisite. No one asks a Shakespeare scholar if he or she is a British male playwright from the sixteenth century. He laughed and conceded the point.

I often forget about my appearance, but I know that to people like my yoga friend I don't look Latina, and my spoken English has only the bland, mongrelized sound of frequent moves among disparate places—Florida, England, West Virginia, Texas, the Midwest—so there's no accent to indicate ethnicity. With my *latinidad* so muted, I sometimes wonder if I should work harder at staging it, in order to signal both my solidarity *con otras* Latinas and my difference from the mainstream. But what would that entail? Big silver hoops in my ears? Red lipstick? Snug skirts and a salsa sway? The polka-dotted halter dresses and head wraps that one visually ambiguous *cubana* friend chooses to wear? But I resent all the jungle exoticism that's foisted on Latinas, from J. Lo on down, so why would I invoke it? For Latinas, performing our gendered ethnic identity always seems to include the notion of heat, spice, a tasty sensuality offered up for consumption.

As a writer, I've always felt like a thinking subject. As a feminist, I've never longed to be an object. The watcher, not the watched. Why should I go around declaring my ethnic identity all the time, as if the whole world were a customs agent, inspecting me?

#### BLOOD

But it's more complicated than that, even, because when I tell the guy at yoga class, "Oh, my family's Cuban," the fact is, I'm passing.

In 1967, when the attorney told my infertile parents (who paid a thousand dollars for the legal right to take me home) that I was a Latina baby, they believed him. Growing up, so did I. Given that the adoption took place in Miami, we all presumed I was probably *cubana*, or maybe *dominicana* or *colombiana*. To fill in the gaps that my closed adoption left, I invented elaborate scenarios: my Catholic schoolgirl mother, unable to destroy her child of passion, sang like Maria in *West Side Story* to my devoted but star-crossed sire, pleading down in the street below like some *vato* Romeo. Sobbing her farewells in Spanish, she relinquished me reluctantly to the nuns.

I was sure that one day I would find her, meet her. To prepare, I read U.S. Latina literature—from all cultures, just to be sure: Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, Esmeralda Santiago, Isabel Allende, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Marjorie Agosín. *Each one of these stories*, I would think, *could be my mother's*. For each, I opened a space in my heart.

In this way, my identity crystallized during adolescence and young adulthood in a kind of pan-Latina formation that was and remains deeply personal, deeply felt.

As any adoptee can tell you, meeting one's birthmother is strange and intense for all sorts of reasons. When I was twenty-six, I met mine, a nice Midwestern lady of Irish, French, and Swedish descent. (Like many Americans, she also claims Cherokee heritage, and it seems plausible, since most of her relatives live in Oklahoma and tell the same story about an ancestor walking the Trail of Tears. My maternal grandmother was a wasp-waisted girl with dark hair and big dark eyes.) My birthmother had taken buses to Miami for the pregnancy and birth, so no one in her hometown of Rockford, Illinois, would know.

I wasn't Latina at all.

In one sudden yank of the rug, I felt my family and identity severed from me. I didn't know where to stand. I didn't want anyone to accuse me of being a faker, a trespasser, a poser, a claimer of things not mine.

For about ten years, I claimed nothing.

#### NOW

At forty-three, when I say I'm Latina, it's a shortcut. It's true, and it gets you quickly to what I want you to know, but it's a falsification, too, a simplification, a smoothing over of layers of complication, deconstruction, loss, of chronic self-interrogation, multiple erasures, and years of painful reconstruction. A delicate, tentative claim I stake.

Ethnicity is complicated, and everyone has an opinion. During my

midthirties, it was an African American friend who kept prodding me, shaking her head. “You’re not white,” she kept saying. “I don’t know what you are, but you sure aren’t white.”

Later, I told a half-Latina, half-white friend about it. “What’s wrong with white?” she snapped. “I hate that attitude.”

Sometimes I just wanted to disappear.

Today I write from a small place, a complicated island with a history that’s almost been lost. I write from a place of clear lip balm and jeans, of a PhD but no love for academia, of no talent in the kitchen (and thus no *Like Water for Chocolate* imitations, no homages to my grandmother’s perfect garlic roast pork). I write from a keen and pissed-off class awareness and the streaming juice of very few mangoes.

Don’t get me wrong: I like mangoes just fine, and key limes, and avocados straight from the tree, *verdad*, but I write with a prickly awareness of the easy appetite among mainstream readers for a romanticized, exoticized version of *latinidad*—a simplified, delicious version I could purvey, a version that would pleasure and sell.

But I don’t want to help readers “eat the other,” in the words of bell hooks. I don’t want to teach you how to dance salsa or spoon you my grandmother’s flan—and I sure as hell don’t want to perform my sexual badness and write about big, dark nipples and violence for the upper-middle-class, educated, white people who read the *New Yorker* and listen to NPR. Providing a delectable frisson of dark, sexy danger is not my literary goal.

Academic Latino studies and ethnic studies programs have done much to articulate—even privilege—the experience and idea of border crossing. Hybridity’s hip, and we’ve all been schooled to admire the supple complexities of liminality. Yet borders still abound, and the risk of crossing them is the same risk it has always been: invisibility, erasure, obliteration. There’s solidarity in numbers; there’s psychic safety in fitting the stereotypes. Readers and publishers know where to slot you, and when national book distribution boils down,

as it does, to thirty seconds of negotiation between your publisher's marketing rep and the Barnes & Noble guy with his laptop open, checking sales figures of past books like yours, it helps if you're simple to sum up.

What happens when a Latina not only doesn't look the part but also doesn't write the part? What happens to Latina writers who cross not only boundaries of nation and culture in their lives but also borders of genre and subject matter in their work? When the content and style of Latina literary productions confound market expectations and publishers' readymade packaging plans, what happens to those manuscripts? What about experimental work that editors believe will baffle Latino y Latina book buyers, whom they believe to be less educated and thus less capable of reading complicated work? *Hijole.*

For me, all the myths have come undone. I don't fit. I don't fit, and that's okay, and that's where I write from: that jagged, smashed place of edges and fragments and grief, of feeling lost, of perilous freedom. I extract small fragile bones from the sand, dust them off with my brush, and build strange, urgent new structures, knowing too well how small my island is, how vast and rising the sea.