

IN THE MARGINS

POETRY EDITED BY FLORINE MELNYK

I.	X.	V.
through the hollow aluminum vent snaking	Fluorescent lights sterilizing the convenience store	sweating inside the silverware drawer
between walls	compete with the milky light of the moon,	a dog whimpers for food—
the rhythmic stomp of a first-floor	heavy on the heaving chest of the sky,	the master realizes his dog
alarm clock sharpening its razors	to see which is brighter	will starve in the event of
seeps through a second- story bedroom grate	while	a power outage.
and slices the frames of dreams with	cars on slick rubber tires	calling from the tips
sweaty blades—	peel away from the pavement,	of his fingers the master
confusing scenes with dead leaves	drivers dreaming of warm bedrooms,	pleads with the dog to come out of the
it tosses them out for the wind's	chased by rippling plastic bags,	silverware drawer and lay at his feet
amusement—	ghostlier white leaves.	to keep them warm.
all of this destruction		—colin scharf
before it peels apart eyes		
carefully		
like sleepy oranges		

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Olga Karman

> interview by Jorge Guitart

What's in *Scatter My Ashes Over Havana*? It's a story. It's my story inserted or woven into history: Cuban history and US history; the Cuban Revolution, the Cuban diaspora, my Harvard days in the '60s, my developing a Hispanic consciousness later on here in the US. It's the story of a Cuban girl who had American dreams, big American dreams. And those dreams, of course, included everything she had seen in the matinees at the Miramar movie theater.

In Havana. Yes, in Havana. Her idea—my idea—the US was based, to a large extent, on what I saw on the silver screen. My head was full of that, and I wanted to make that dream mine. My mother was American; she was born in the US, and she had American friends who came to Cuba to visit. They invited me to spend a year in Scarsdale. I was 15 then. That's where I met the American boy I would marry five years later. And so my story is about life in Cuba both before and during the triumph of the Revolution—the first two years after Castro took power—and then life in the United States and, thirty-seven years later, my first return to Havana.

What will readers find in your book? I think they will find a life. They'll read about the life of a girl who becomes a woman in the United States and who suddenly finds herself with nothing. Nothing! No family, no checkbook, no clear sense even of where she was, and in a bad marriage. She was 20 years old. What was she going to do? So in that sense the book is very much, I would say, a woman's book, but also a person's book; and also perhaps an immigrant's book. It's about what it's like to find yourself uprooted and to have to start from scratch. What does it mean? How do you find a place for yourself? Who are you? Ultimately that's the question. And I think it becomes much more difficult to answer if you can't go back to the place where you came from. So the book is also a quest for identity, for a sense of place; but also a story of triumph over adversity. It's about a dream gone bad and then a dream gone good.

Is that the American dream you were talking about? Oh, no, no! My American dream had no bad parts. My American dream was *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*, *Picnic*, *Doris Day*, *Tea for Two*. There were no glitches in my American dream. So what eventually developed was very surprising to me, and quite unexpected. I was not prepared. Although, at age 20, who is prepared for anything except dreams?

Many Cubans who came to the US in the wake of the Cuban Revolution consider themselves exiles rather than immigrants. What was the label that fit you when you first came to this country? The label that fit me was bride. I came to this country with my trousseau in my suitcase. I was the person who two weeks later was going to be in a wedding, my own wedding. Of course, it didn't occur to me that I wouldn't know anybody there, that when I walked into that church in Scarsdale I'd know no one. But this scene was not part of my American dream.

Some people here may ask you whether there are any virtues to the system that Cubans live under at the present time. Well, I tried to make my book not be a political manifesto or an ideological manifesto. I see we're veering in that direction!



PHOTO BY ROSE MATTREY

When I went back, what were the virtues I saw? The ones that were there before. People obsessed about education. Weren't we just like that? In Havana, starting in eighth grade, we had three hours of homework on an easy night. When I went to Connecticut College, it was easy. It was in a different language, but it was not hard. Even graduate school. I mean, it was a lot of work, but it was not as hard as high school in Havana! When I went back, I still saw a love for culture and art. But that I learned when I was cutting my teeth in Havana. We all saw Alicia Alonso dance when we were kids. And the music? Hello? Look at the great Cuban music that has been "discovered" now, the Buena Vista Social Club, for example. That was there before—those musicians were from before. That's not today's music. The virtues I found were the old ones. What's miraculous is that they're still alive.

I remember you once called yourself a Cuban by birth and a Buffalonian by choice. Do you still hold by that? Ah, sure. But I can't give away my book. So, no comment. Suffice to say, I love Buffalo. I think that if you travel far, you come to love Buffalo even more. No place is richer. Think of the art, the music, the literature; just open *Gusto* on any Friday, open *Artvoice*. And yet, you can make a u-turn on Main Street at four in the afternoon. Isn't that wonderful?

Let's close by talking about the very title of your book: *Scatter My Ashes Over Havana*. That sounds like a command, or a request. Is that a true request? And why Havana? Why not Buffalo, where you have lived for so many years? Before I knew that I would return to Havana, and—how old was I? 56 or 57—before I returned, I would ask my daughter Carla and my son Nathaniel and anyone else in the family who would listen to promise me that if I died before having gone back to Havana they would scatter my ashes over my city. They would pooh-pooh me and say that I was being dramatic, but they agreed. And then I went back. Does that need still remain, the need to have my ashes scattered over Havana? I can't answer that here because that's the last chapter in the book.

Olga Karman's new book, Scatter My Ashes Over Havana, is forthcoming from PurePlay Press.

LITCITY

7/27

Chautauqua Literary & Scientific Circle. 3:30pm. Roundtable lectures in the Hall of Philosophy, every Thursday. This week Eugene Linden presents his new book *The Winds of Change: Climate, Weather, and the Destruction of Civilizations*. Chautauqua Institute (357 6250) www.ciweb.org.

8/1

Book Discussion. Aug. 1, 15, & 29, 12-1pm. "The Rise of the Creative Class, by Richard Florida: How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life." Facilitated by Chuck Lachiusa. Buffalo Architecture Center at the Market Arcade (617 Main St). Call the Landmark Society of WNY (852-3300) for more info.

8/2

Literary Cafe. 7:30pm. Featuring Michael Kelleher and Ethan Paquin, with slots available for open readers. Center for Inquiry (1310 Sweet Home Rd., 636-4869).

8/3

Booksigning. 7pm. Poet Olga Karman will sign and discuss her first book of prose, *Scatter My Ashes Over Havana*. Talking Leaves Books (3158 Main St., 837-8554).

Chautauqua Literary & Scientific Circle. 3:30pm. Roundtable lectures in the Hall of Philosophy, every Thursday. This week Geraldine Brooks will present her new book *March*. Chautauqua Institute (357 6250) www.ciweb.org.

Children's Writer's and Illustrators Group. 7pm. Meets the first Thursday of each month. Borders Books (2015 Walden Ave., Cheektowaga, 685-2844). Visit www.first-thursdaycreative.blogspot.com for more info.

RECURRING EVENTS

EM Tea Coffee Cup Open Mic Poetry Series. 7-9:30pm every Tuesday EM Tea Coffee Cup Café, 80 Oakgrove Ave. at Hughes St. (884-1444)

Just Buffalo Writers Critique Group. 7pm, meets first and third Wednesday of every month. Flux Gallery, Market Arcade Arts Centre; just buffalo literary center members only. (832-5400)

Moonlight Poetry Circle. 9pm, first Fri. of each month. Share poetry informally through spoken word, song, music, art, etc. 320 West Ave., lower. moonlightcircle@hotmail.com

Northside Writers Group. 7pm, first and third Thursday of each month. Ascension Lutheran Church, 4640 Main Street, Amherst. (626-4204).

Send weekly literary event info (name, description, location, date, time, and admission) to: editorial@artvoice.com, subject "In The Margins," or fax to: 881-6682. Listings must be received by the Wednesday before publication for consideration.

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In the Margins features poetry by local writers on an irregular, though roughly monthly basis. The poetry editor will be Florine Melnyk. Submissions of no more than 5 poems and no more than ten pages in length can be sent by e-mail to florine@starcherone.com or by mail to Florine Melnyk, Poetry Editor, Artvoice, 810 Main St., Buffalo, NY 14202 Please include a self-addressed stamped envelope to have manuscripts returned.