

Virgil Suárez



Tio Anibal

EL GRAN MANDRAKE IN LAS VILLAS, CUBA, 1969

My Tio Anibal balanced himself on the orange
Pumpkins that grew round and thick on fields,
He said he'd walk to Egypt and back hopping
From pumpkin to pumpkin. He let me ride

Horses with him, taking me deep into the forest,
Beyond the charred cane fields that burned, glowed
In the night, to hunt for birds, *azulejos*, *mariposas*,
Tomequines nesting in low shrubs. We fished

The lakes for perch, on horseback, the horse leg-
Deep in water, insects buzzing around the horse's
Ears. Once my uncle turned his horse's ear inside
Out and showed me the black ticks, swollen

With blood, like beads strung up in lines. He'd
Pick them out and the horse'd flinch, neigh,
And flick its tail. Between his fingers, my uncle'd
Pop fat ticks, squirt blood on the saddle.

My grandmother called my uncle, her son, Mandrake,
After the magician, because she said my uncle could
Disappear, and I would always think of him skipping
To Egypt on the pumpkins, leaving a trail of ticks

And tick blood to find his way back. My uncle
Disappeared to the house on the hill, as she called
That place where men went on the weekends, a house
Of red lights, faint music in the distance, the laughter

Of women. My uncle would disappear for days,
And then just like magic there he'd be in the kitchen,
Dunking toasted bread into his coffee, smiling,
His hat on his knee, his dusty, cracked boots.

This was Cuba in 1969. Thirty years later, my mother
Calls me in Tallahassee to say that Tio Anibal
Has died of cancer, some kind of skin cancer
That ate him up in little pieces, his fingers, his nose

A deliberate act of disappearance, *el desaparecimiento*,
And I can believe how when the time comes we too
Disappear, we all do, the best magic trick from which
There's no return, only the awed look of a mute audience.

