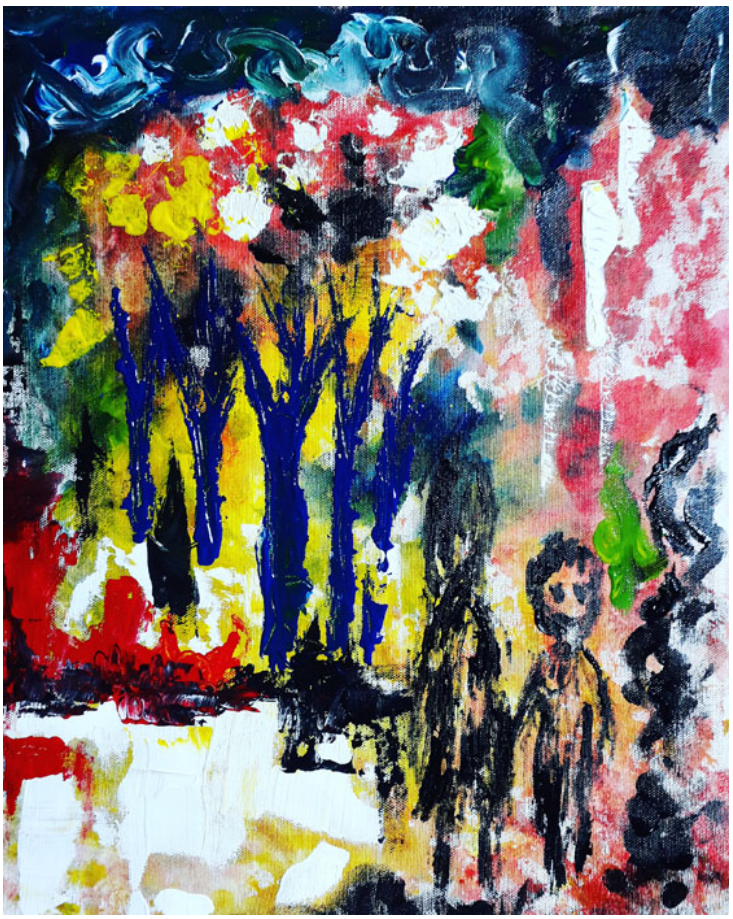
ESSAY

pionero

by Lázaro Gutiérrez



"My childhood" by Ipung Purnomo

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There’s something odd about looking at pictures from my childhood. Inside them is a different life, a different spectrum of colors I hardly recognize today. The boy in the image is slim, shy, ready to participate. A *pionero* who only ever wore the blue scarf, *la pañoleta azul* . In second grade, he won *el beso de la patria* (the kiss of the country), the highest honor a scholar could receive at that point.

I would never have foreseen this journey for there were many decisions along the way over which I had no control but am ultimately grateful for. My coming to America being one of those decisions.

At eight, my parents brought me to this new world. An abundant world that promised me I could have anything I ever wanted. And so I set my mind to doing just that, to excavate the dirt I was given and find the treasures hidden within. To make something of myself because where we come from — no matter how smart you are — you remain nothing.

I knew I could do everything here I could not do before. It was as if we had unlocked a new level in the game of life. My father, being a good player, had known of this level, so he had tried seven times. He built boats with his bare hands and then he threw himself into the ocean to get to the level he wanted. Here we would become aware of all of the things we lacked in our current level. But this method did not work, it simply wouldn’t, his feet were never dry enough; he was always caught on the water. It seemed as though the universe chose not to separate us but send us to liberty following a different route.

Patience was the key we needed after all and eventually the level was unlocked by a method which we thought would take a long time, only it didn’t, *la loteria* (the lottery). No, not the powerball but to us the best lottery we could have won at the time. Winning our way out of Cuba taught me that sometimes the urgency of leaving the current level is what keeps us from getting to the next one.

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The day we left, both my mother’s family and my father’s family came with us to the airport. All of them waited with us until it was time to depart. Their cries were traumatic; I cried and cried as I consumed myself in the hugs and kisses of teary people. The abuelita that raised me when my mother was sick, the abuelita that cooked fresh eggs for me on her farm (she died last year, a day after my birthday). Abuelitos Amado and Antonio, my cousins, my aunts and uncles, family friends. All in collective weeping that felt like mourning and left me a bit scared of what was to come. As if we were going away forever. My mother cried for most of the forty-five minute flight. Although we were all in pain, I remember looking out the window of the plane and whispering in her ear, “Creo que aquí me gusta mas.”

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I think I like it better here.

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I vividly remember our first day in America. We slept in the chairs of the airport, waiting for a social worker who would come to take us to a motel filled with other newly-arrived immigrants. When she did find us, she took us to McDonald's. I had a big mac (although at the time I had no idea what it was I was eating) and couldn't believe the size of the sandwich in my hands, the fries, the endless options of drinks and food that I had never tasted or seen in my life. Even after we were done eating, I held on to the McDonald's bag filled with leftovers. I did not want to throw the bag away because I thought it was so cool. It gave me the same feeling I get now whenever, instead of drinking Bustelo at home, I spend $8 on a coffee at Starbucks. The hungry child inside me did not permit us to throw the bag of leftovers away. And I held on to it tightly as if I would never eat McDonald's again. For some reason, we had to sleep at the airport; the social worker explained that she would come back for us the next day. That night, I remember playing on the escalators, going up and down and laughing with my dad. He had $100 in his pocket and I thought we were rich. He made me feel safe that night. My parents made me feel as if everything was going to be just fine. They made the transition from nothing to everything gentle and compassionate. Today I wonder if I would have the strength they had had to just get up and leave everything behind to start a new life in a country where you don't even speak the language.

Life hadn't been easy but somehow it felt as though it would be easier now. It felt as though I no longer had to wait to eat again. Now I could have nice coloring pencils and crayons and toys. The social worker took us to a place filled with clothes and toys and I got to stuff a trash bag with whatever toy I wanted. So many toys! So many options to choose from; I had never seen something so new and shiny and plastic!

But in my mind, echoes of the past repeated; *patria o muerte venceremos, el himno nacional, la Guantanamera*, my second grade teacher whose daughter died and still she came back to finish the school year not to let us down. Our families crying together at the airport upon our departure. Although I was young, my brain understood that everything was changing rapidly and that I would need to adapt — *rapidly*.

*

My second time on a plane was from Miami, Florida, to Newport News, Virginia. The turbulence caused me to vomit all over myself; goddam turbulence. The girls in the back laughed at me; the pretzels and sprite made me sick; I can still taste their dry saltiness that gave me a headache, the refreshing yet somewhat nauseating can of sprite. I had never even

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been on a roller coaster much less a fucking plane. I was humiliated and on top of all of this we were advised to wear large coats and prepare for the cold of Virginia — it was around 80 degrees that day.

We were greeted by the friends we had made at the motel, although some of us had gone to other states. Some went to Buffalo, New York, some stayed in Florida. But many had already arrived at the Sherwood Place apartments. They helped get our apartment ready. I arrived to more toys and a little bed with Spider-Man bed sheets. My first bite into a red, delicious apple was disappointing. “This isn’t as crunchy as it was made to be in Snow White,” I thought. It is one of the memories I think of most often, watching Snow White on a video cassette on the rented VHS the neighborhood passed around. I always thought the apple looked so sweet and crisp but it turned out to be very mushy on the inside. Our time at Sherwood Place made us many friends, some I still keep in touch with today. It was the most tight-knit community I have ever been part of. We all had something in common: The U.S. was new to us. The first few months, we ate chicken every day; it was a luxury in Cuba to eat chicken. So, my mother cooked *pollo en salsa* and *pollo con papa, pollo frito,* and *arroz con pollo* and any other way you could think of. Today I am a vegan and to them, I think, that is an insult. “Despues de todo el hambre que pasamos en Cuba,” I hear my mother say. *After all the hunger we went through in Cuba.*

Hunger. Hunger in Cuba leads to eating *pan con aceite* and *agua con azucar*. Our first trip to “Gual mal” was overwhelming. I remember being mesmerized by the rotisserie chickens, the endless options of cheeses, and drinks, and desserts, and other foods we had only dreamed of.

The advertisements, the warning of Walmart being so big that you could get lost in it. When you take a Cuban into a Walmart for the first time, their reaction is always priceless, no matter how old or young, it always feels like taking someone to wonderland. The excess of everything is overstimulating when all you have seen in life — is nothing.

We didn’t have a car yet but it was no problem, we rolled the shopping cart alongside the highway until a cop found us. We didn’t speak any English and I don’t know how the hell we communicated, but the cop brought us back to our apartments, our bags loaded with food bought with the food stamps we had been awarded upon our arrival.

I was unaware of the immigrant privilege at the time because I had never known privilege before and to me everyone who came to America was treated like tourists on a vacation, arriving at the most beautiful destination you could imagine, being greeted with offerings and an abundance of everything. I was unaware that I got to fly and that in itself was a huge advantage. I was unaware that I got a bed upon arriving in a comfortable place to stay that

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had a carpet and air conditioning, that I would have it all set up for success unlike many. Yes, there would be unpredictable struggles but today — in spite of the difficulties — I realize we had it easier than most people we soon met. The majority of us in the complex came from different countries, many of us from Cuba and other parts of the Caribbean, some from Africa, others from Mexico, many from South America. As I began to learn of the different paths to freedom we all had walked, I also learned of the inequalities we all faced.

We had one thing in common, though we spoke different languages, we all came here chasing this freedom that people like to call "the American dream." Today I question if that dream is still alive within me or if I am just a product of all of this. Today I learned I am part of a generation that is meant to bridge the gap between my parents and my sister and son, who were both born into this land and embody it, for it is their true home.
you see we gave up who we knew,
we gave up who we used to be,
we gave up our languages,
we gave up our education,
we gave up our careers,
we gave up our families,
all to have a little taste of *libertad.*

A sliver of happiness, a taste of the American Coca Cola, *la del olvido.* We settled into a land that could one day reject us because, although it was now home, was it really home? Today I wonder if it has ever been my home. Today I wonder if I can even call myself American.

I grew up here and I am grateful I did. Life has been good to me — to me. I went to college; I got a nice job; I started a family with a wonderful woman and we had the most beautiful son. His smile reminds me that this is what we came here for. I look into his eyes, at his bright teeth, and I see the splendor of never struggling or needing anything. That is why we are here. But every time I open the old album my mother had filled with pictures of my childhood, my friends, my school, I see all of the people I knew, who look so familiar yet in a way they are now strangers. I think of them often, more than they probably think of me. I think of them all and wonder what happened with their lives, I wonder if I were to contact them — would they remember me?

We never returned. I never went back to see my friends. The majority of the family members who had been crying at the airport though — most of them are here today. Somehow we helped bring them all here. But I wonder if my friends got out or if they are perhaps marching with the rest of them, chanting in the streets, ending up in jail at the hands of

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injustice, bleeding for liberty, no longer numbed by the pain of totalitarianism, refusing to be chained and told that they are free. I wonder if all of those *pioneros* rebelled against their oppressive father when they became teenagers.

I wonder if my friends are fighting for my mother the way I did not. No longer chanting of glorious death but *patria y vida*, *carajo*!

Patria y vida!

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