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Cañaverales

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CAÑAVERALES

The mapmaker's cane cutters are clean and happy
in crisp linen, machetes and straw hats.
One holds the sugar cane like a flag on a May 20th
parade. The other could be planting a beach umbrella.
The husband of Tía Carolina ran a modern "central,"
a huge sugar mill which replaced the 19th century
"ingenios" that painter Eduardo LaPlante
illustrated with such elegance.

Since she was my father's aunt, my mother made sure
I knew her whole story. They were rich, had their own
French chef, and Carolina's cuckold husband accepted everything.
One of their sons gallantly saved Fidel's life by smuggling
him out of the University in the trunk of his red convertible
past a blockade of Batista's troops. Once in power,
Fidel had him executed on a whim. We visited Carolina in Miami,
broke and in exile like the rest of us. Her brittle, long
nails quivered and her silver hair was more dishevelled
than Lear's. I imagined her in one of LaPlante's
ingenios, rocking on a porch between columns
and breezes that encircled the administrator's mansion,
in a sunfilled linen dress and Manila shawl,
her hair knotted into a sphere. Slipping
from her hand a nacre fan sleeps like a book on her lap.
She took my arm suddenly in that broken apartment off Flagler
that seemed like a nursery for peeling paint, she stared
into my eyes, "I thought our workers loved us. We paid them
better than anyone, they had good houses and a beautiful school
and clinic." I know, Tía—but actually I didn't.
I thought her eyes were washed with guilt. They weren't.

She knew her son was dead. She sensed, erroneously,
that what a child thought mattered. In the brown distance,
from the apartment across the hall, cheap music
danced with a cheap argument. Tía Carolina's eyes dipped

into a flowery demitasse of café cubano which had a third of the handle missing. Her thumb, middle and index fingers held the cup by the broken handle and covered the missing part.