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Frank Varela

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### Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."



# In Memory of My Grandfather

by Frank Varela



*This poem began its life as a praise poem to the great Puerto Rican actor, Raúl Julia. In some ways, it still is a poem that honors Julia, but what I thought was done began to transform itself into something completely different. The artist of the painting referred to in the poem remains unknown to me, but his work hangs in a public gallery on Calle Cristo in Old San Juan.*

*For Vincent Varela*

Old San Juan gallery,  
pretty tour guide shows me an oil:  
street children selling raspberries.  
"Look at their eyes," she urges,  
"Puerto Ricans, a people of sorrow.  
The eyes tell you that, don't you see?"  
But what I see are irises—color of coffee,  
light picks on darker pupils,  
thin faces, upturned imploring.  
I look again at the painting,  
her eyes,  
the painting,  
her eyes.

Thirty years later,  
I see Raúl Julia dancing **Tango Bar**,  
and he is smoldering twilight,  
a whisper as soft as rain.  
The woman he loves joins him.  
Together they step, side step tango drama  
on the tape I rented from Manny's video,  
and for the first time I see them—  
Puerto Rican eyes  
that once snared me with a spider's kiss,  
but one man, no matter how beautiful,  
is only a solitary voice  
that rains down tears too small  
to quench the thirst that lingers in my throat.

I also hunger for bread,  
the memory of my grandfather;  
the great rock of his face weathered  
by the storms of eighty summers,  
the furrows around his mouth,  
a geology deeper than any canyon,  
and his eyes of heavy water  
staring back at me in that sad way of men  
who live by the labor of their hands—  
street children selling raspberries,  
pretty tour guide  
in Old San Juan gallery:  
her eyes,  
his eyes,  
my eyes.



Art by Elizabeth Erazo Baez; www.BaezFineArt.com

Brooklyn-born poet **Frank Varela**, the author of **Serpent Underfoot** by March Abrazo Press, published children's stories in **Front Row**, The Riverside Publishing Company, and in **Tun-Ta-Ca-Tun** and **Kikiriki**, both by Arte Publico Press. His work has been featured in such journals and anthologies as *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, **Another Chicago Magazine**, **The Floating Borderlands**, **Apocalypse 6 & 7**, **Halogen**, **Hammers**, **Latino Stuff Review**, **The Americas Review**, **Puerto del Sol**, **The Bilingual Review** and **Power Lines**. He earned degrees from Catholic University of Puerto Rico, Central Michigan University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In 1997, Varela was named Hispanic Librarian of the Year by the Illinois Secretary of State and has received grants and awards from the Illinois Arts Council. He is a senior staff member of the Chicago Public Library and one of the coordinators of the Library's annual poetry festival. He currently lives in Chicago with his wife and son. Contact the poet at [ealoomis@aol.com](mailto:ealoomis@aol.com).

**Johanny Vázquez Paz**, born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico, holds an M.A. in Hispanic Studies from the University of Illinois at Chicago and a B.A. in Sociology from Indiana State University. She won the Voces Selectas 2000 poetry contest by Luz Bilingüe Publishing (California), who, subsequently, published a selection of her poems in the collection **Carpetas de luz**. She currently teaches Spanish at Olive Harvey College in Chicago. She co-edited with Brenda Cardenas the new anthology **Between the Heart & the Land/Entre el corazón y la tierra: Latina Poets in the Midwest** (March Abrazo Press).