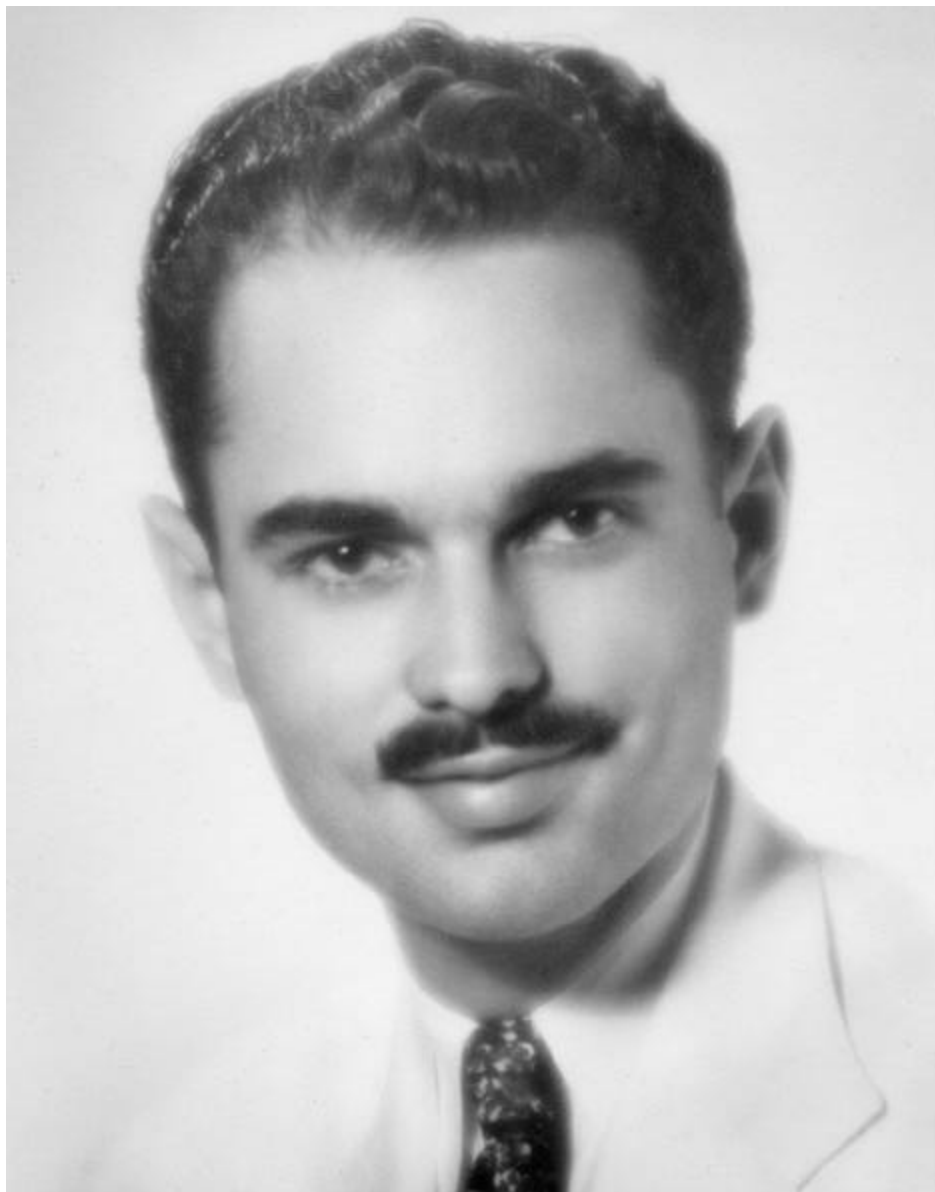


RUBÉN DARÍO RUMBAUT
1922-2003



A REMEMBRANCE

*Y cuando llegue el día del último viaje,
y esté al partir la nave que nunca ha de tornar,
me encontraréis a bordo ligero de equipaje,
casi desnudo, como los hijos de la mar.*

—Antonio Machado

Rubén Darío Rumbaut y López was born on July 10, 1922, in Cienfuegos, Cuba, on the southern shore of the Pearl of the Antilles. For eighty years he lived a storybook life, ambushed by the unexpected.

He came from a family of modest origins, but one gifted with a tenacious creativity. He was the son of Bienvenido (the name means “Welcome”...a sense of humor runs in the family) Rumbaut Yanes and Zoila Rosa López Fundora. Zoila was the youngest of fourteen children (all named with a flair) of Hermenegildo López (an intemperate authoritarian called “Don Merejo” behind his back) and Rosa Fundora. Bienvenido’s father, Vicente Ramón Rumbaut de la Cruz, had worked as a carpenter in a rural area of Las Villas province, became known as a guitar player and singer who made up his own verses, and married his second cousin Manuela Yanes Díaz. Doña Manuelita, as she was called, was very religious and proper, had a huge *baúl* in the house full of books, and had once met José Martí, being especially impressed by his eyes (“*tenía ojos muy penetrantes*”).

When Bienvenido was a child, at the outset of the revolutionary war against Spain, the family was forced to move from the countryside to Rodas, a small town near Cienfuegos, in an ox cart packed with their few belongings and their children; one of the children fell victim to smallpox and died en route. Bienvenido was studious and loved to read, and was often heard singing. It was in Rodas as a young man that he met the voluptuous and vivacious Zoila, who though from a poor family carried herself with an air of sophistication. But when he asked her father Hermenegildo for her hand in marriage he was told to forget it, for he had “nothing to offer.” Bienvenido set out to make something of himself, becoming in time a newspaper editor, pharmacist, business school professor, orator and poet, and a key figure in the cultural life of Cienfuegos. In 1921 he married Zoila, who a year later gave birth to a son they named after the much admired Nicaraguan poet, Rubén Darío. Poetic justice, for this Rubén Darío too became a poet, influenced both by the Nicaraguan master and by Cuba’s own man for all seasons, José Martí.

Zoila worked as a kindergarten teacher and made a small salary, though she also wrote scores of songs and a kindergarten songbook that was used officially throughout Cuba for many years. Zoila and Bienvenido always rented, and owned no car; Bienvenido took the streetcar or bus to work. Zoila loved to organize theater and dances. Parties at her house could become productions, with props, sets, costumes, assigned roles, the works. Rubén Darío grew up in this culturally rich environment, and attended public schools because the family had no money for a private education. But Cienfuegos had no public high school, so Bienvenido cut a deal with the *Colegio de los Hermanos Maristas*—fully paid tuition for his son in exchange for free advertising for the school in his newspaper. Rubén Darío finished his secondary education there, and it was also while with the Maristas that he became involved with Catholic thought.

In 1939, Rubén Darío went to study medicine at the University of Havana. Though almost no tuition was charged, the family had little money to support him while he studied away from home. He spent his first months in Havana residing in a hospital, in exchange for laboratory work. Later, his *madrina* (godmother) Felisa decided to help by moving to Havana and opening a boarding house, where she cooked, cleaned and did laundry for Rubén and other students. He reconnected with the Maristas while in Havana, became the representative of Las Villas province in the National Council of the Juventud Católica Cubana, and later national vice-president. He also became the editor of its Catholic journal *Juventudes*, and even composed a rousing march, “*Clarínada*,” both music and lyrics, that became

and remains the informal hymn of the Catholic Federation. The Federation's newsletter, which continues to be published to this day, is named *Clarínada* after his composition.

It was through his active leadership in the *Juventud* that Rubén Darío was to meet his future wife and love of his life, Carmen (“Carmita”) Riera, herself a national Catholic Youth leader. After an engagement of five years—which saw a proliferation of love poems, and a beautiful song that he composed for her, “*Tú me amarás*”—they were married in 1947, the year after Rubén Darío earned his M.D. To their many friends, “Carmita y Rubén” came to mean an indivisible unity. She became his constant companion in a romance that would span more than half a century. Soon the children started arriving—in 1948, 1949, 1950, 1953, 1955... and yet a sixth who was born in the United States in 1963. Together they forged a family that today extends to eleven grandchildren and three newborn great grandchildren, for whom they set a rich example of lasting love. In the 1990s, at a family reunion in Texas, a chorus of their children and nieces serenaded them with a surprise rendition of “*Tú me amarás*.”

Rubén Darío began his medical career as an anesthesiologist (and even wrote a monograph on the subject), but three years later switched to psychiatry (he sometimes noted wryly that he “went from one way of putting people to sleep to another”). Amid his work as a practicing psychiatrist, a growing family, and intensifying political turmoil, the old role model of his father Bienvenido's newspaper in Cienfuegos and Rubén Darío's own love of journalism led him to complete the four-year program at the national School of Journalism in Havana, graduating with Valedictorian honors in 1957, an achievement of which he was especially proud. He continued to write his vigorous prose for newspapers for the rest of his life.

During the years of his university studies, Rubén Darío was repulsed by the politics of the time, seeing mainly *politiqueros* and *pandilleros* in the field, but engaged civic life actively and sought national political and socioeconomic reform through Catholic Action. He read voraciously and wrote incessantly, in time becoming a prolific and renowned author of articles, monographs, essays and poems published in newspapers and magazines all over the island. In 1950, he co-founded the Humanist Movement in Cuba, inspired by the ideas of the French philosopher and theologian Jacques Maritain. As the movement's president, Rubén Darío argued that integral humanism offered an alternative to the great confrontation between liberal capitalism and communism, systems in which he saw the human person as corralled and dehumanized by the primacy, respectively, of capital and the state.

The movement was suppressed by Fulgencio Batista's coup d'etat in March 1952. But always one to practice—and to pen—what he preached, in April, one month after the coup and one month before the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Cuban Republic, Rubén Darío published a gutsy article in the national magazine, *Bohemia*, entitled “*Esta es la hora de la Generación del Cincuentenario*,” in which he called for “the generation of the fiftieth” to rise in non-violent direct-action protest, as in the historic example of Baraguá in the previous century, to take responsibility for Cuban history and constitutional government without terrorism: “We need liberty to live as much as air to breathe, and this need cannot be left to the caprices of anyone... *Que ninguno dispare, ni se calle, ni se esconda, ni se venda, ni se vaya*.” By May 1952, Rubén Darío had become a leader of the *Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario*, founded in response to the coup. By April 1959, soon after Batista's flight and the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, he again wielded his trenchant pen in national publications to write of “*El Humanismo y La Revolución*.”

Exiled to the United States in 1960, he started “from below scratch” with \$450 and a handful of cardboard suitcases for a family of seven who spoke no English. After the debacle of the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, which made it clear that the family's exile would be prolonged indefinitely, he took accelerated courses in English at the University of Miami to prepare himself to take the “Foreign Medical Exam,” with a tenacity that was rewarded when he passed it on the first try, permitting him to begin to rebuild his medical career: First in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he served as Director of

the Veterans Administration Hospital's Mental Hygiene Clinic; and then in Topeka, Kansas, where his thesis at the Menninger School of Psychiatry won the Distinguished Writing Award—in English!—later published in a critically acclaimed bilingual edition as *John of God: His Place in the History of Psychiatry and Medicine*. In 1971 he moved to Houston, where he served at the Veterans Administration Medical Center as Director of its Day Hospital and later Assistant Chief, and taught at the Baylor College of Medicine for a quarter of a century until his retirement as Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry, earning many honors along the way in a distinguished career. Although he had to start his medical career all over again, in a new and difficult language and after the age of 40, with the responsibilities of a large family growing up in the cauldron of the sixties, by the time of his retirement he was a Fellow Emeritus of the American College of Psychiatry and of the American Psychiatric Association.

His numerous scientific papers, essays, and book reviews—the latter of which, on topics on the history of medicine, are classics of the genre—appeared in leading professional journals in the U.S. and Spain, including the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, and the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. For ten years he served as the editor of the Newsletter of Hispanic Psychiatrists in the USA, and for many more was actively involved in leadership roles in a number of pan-American cultural, historical, literary, and professional associations. He is the author of publications on a wide range of historical themes, and for four decades was a frequent contributor to the Miami-based *Diario Las Américas*. His poetry, in two languages, has appeared in anthologies published in the U.S. and Argentina, and in his book of poems, *Esa Palabra*, which established him, in the words of a review published at the time (1981), as “one of Cuba’s best poets.”

A few years after the death in 1997 of his beloved wife Carmen, his inseparable companion for more than half a century, he moved to San Marcos to live next to his daughter Michelle and her family. As his physical condition deteriorated, he amazed us with his stoic graciousness and resigned equanimity, never complaining, maintaining his characteristic sense of humor until the end. He died peacefully at his home in San Marcos, in the company of his children, on March 14, 2003.

One of Rubén Darío's earliest poems recalled his grandmother Manuela: “*Como de puntillitas pasaba por la vida, sin ruidos y sin prisas, con apacible calma... y se nos fue, en la muerte, también de puntillitas.*” Although he achieved prominence as a writer, poet and physician across a lifespan filled with historic *ruidos* and crises and revolutionary turmoil, in Cuba and in exile, he confronted them with unrushed tenacity (“sin prisa, con calma”), and like Doña Manuelita, he left us, in death, “*de puntillitas.*”

A multifaceted man of uncommon integrity—a man for all seasons—his razor-sharp wit and wry humor, brilliant writings, keen observations and sage advice, deep humanity, avid and insatiate curiosity, love of learning and of his native land, and fidelity to family and friends will be deeply missed by countless many who came to know him and whose lives he touched and enriched—and above all by his six children, Rubén and his wife Irene, Luis, Carlos and his wife Marilyn, Miryam, Carmen, Michelle and her husband Dugan; his eleven grandchildren, Sasha, Jessica and her husband Evan, Joshua, Jazmín, Andrea, Clint, Keegan, Rubén Darío, Luis Ernesto, Robert and Audra; his great grandchildren Ava and Elena; his sister Carucha, his nieces Estela and María Aurora, and grand nephew Jeffrey; and other members of the family in Cuba, Spain, and throughout the United States.

In keeping with his wishes, his ashes will, at an appropriate time, be taken to Cienfuegos, his beloved birthplace, and strewn over the waters of the Bahía de Jagua, at the confluence of the sea and five rivers, above all the majestic Damují of his youth—the same waters that opened into his first glimpse of the sea, with which he would have a lifelong love affair, inspiring lyrical poems and essays (such as his “*Evocaciones Cubanas: El Mar,*” attached to this Remembrance) and his well-known song “*Cienfuegos, tierra mía*”... an alluring sea which would become, in exile, a symbol of loss and longing and, ultimately, of his loyal, faithful, and eternal return home.

Evocaciones Cubanas: El Mar

El mar de la Bahía de Jagua fue el primero que se asomó a mis ojos. Mar sereno, verdiazul, suavemente ondulado, siempre enamorando... Bahía hermosísima, extensísima, casi totalmente cerrada y con la sola y estrecha abertura en embudo de Pasacaballos. Una larga lengua de tierra—Punta Gorda—la divide en dos, y la vista se pierde a ambos lados en el horizonte de límites imprecisos. Cinco ríos, liderados por el Damují majestuoso, vierten su dulce contenido en las salinas aguas... hasta el viejo Castillo de Jagua—con sus piedras aún erguidas como en posición de alerta... El mar, la bahía, la ciudad: ni en la geografía ni en la historia pueden ya separarse:

*“Cienfuegos, tierra mía,
donde es más fino el aire, más tersa la bahía
y más clara la luz...”*

Mi segundo encuentro con el mar fue en La Habana: el mar bravío del norte, el mar del Morro, del Puerto y del sólido y serpenteante Malecón. Allí el oleaje bate incesantemente contra el muro, mientras buques enormes entran despaciosamente al puerto bajo la altiva vigilancia de la Farola del Castillo... Las barcas de la corta travesía hacia Regla y La Cabaña brincan sobre las olas encrespadas mientras los pasajeros se empapan de espuma, y los ojos se irritan por el viento, y los labios saben de pronto a salitre y a iodo. La capital queda a la espalda, extendida, ruidosa, imponente, con un perfil quebrado de rascacielos, parques, avenidas y monumentos.

Más tarde en mi vida me llegó la sorpresa increíble de Varadero, hallazgo casi puro del azul, del blanco, del sol, del agua, de la vastedad y la belleza y la inquietud del mar... de la arena pulida, deslumbrante, finísima, tal como quedó luego de ser desmenuzada y labrada por los dedos incansables de las olas y los siglos... Las imágenes se suceden ahora en la memoria: la playita recoleta de Jibacoa; la ancha, clara y acogedora de Santa María; el panorama marítimo a lo largo de las carreteras costeras; la súbita visión inolvidable de Matanzas desde la montaña; los pueblecitos pesqueros, tan típicos, tan amables, tan rústicos, tan llenos de paz. Inmenso anillo acuático, rodeando a la isla entera, desde Pinar hasta Oriente, desde la cayería del norte de Camagüey hasta el extremo sur de Isla de Pinos...

Hoy busco a mi alrededor la hasta hace poco presencia inseparable del mar y no la encuentro. Evoco el claro mar del verano y el mar gris del invierno, el mar airado de los huracanes y el mar plácido de los días sin viento, el mar pintoresco de los pescadores y el mar alucinante de los poetas y de los pintores. Aquí, en el corazón del continente, el mar es algo exótico, desconocido y lejano, del que sólo traen noticias los viajeros, los habitantes de las costas y de las islas, y aquellos que alguna vez se sumergieron en su seno y no han podido olvidar la voluptuosa sensación de las olas refrescantes, y la espuma, y la arena, y los rayos ardientes sobre la piel elástica...

Recuerdo. Es la hora del crepúsculo, cuando el desierto parece un poco el océano y las estrellas empiezan a buscar en vano donde reflejarse. Recuerdo...Cuba. Varadero. La Habana. Jagua. La bahía. El mar. Jagua, otra vez, con su imagen primera del mar y de los ríos. Recuerdo y canto:

*“Como va hacia tus aguas el ancho Damují,
cuando llegue mi hora iré a morir en tí.
Y el ritmo de las olas cantará para mí:
Ya volvió como tú, como tú, Damují.
Ya volvió como tú: ¡cómo tú, Damují!”*

—Rubén Darío Rumbaut