

JACK AGÜEROS

'*Agua Viva*,' a Sculpture by Alfredo Gonzalez

from *Dominoes and Other Stories from the Puerto Rican*

FOCUS

Jack Agüeros' story, "'Agua Viva,' a Sculpture by Alfredo Gonzalez," is printed in his collection, entitled *Dominoes and Other Stories from the Puerto Rican*. Jack Agüeros was born in New York City in 1934 and has been the recipient of numerous awards. He is a poet, a playwright, and an author of children's stories, and he has written for television's "Sesame Street" and WNBC-TV. He has also been the director of the Museo del Barrio in East Harlem, the only Puerto Rican museum in the United States. Jack Agüeros has said of his writing "I don't like the way Latinos often get portrayed. The lives of working people are unheard from because it's hard to write about them. But those lives are frequently heroic and have their drama, too. I'm also interested in what happens to them."

The knuckles ached as did the hands of the man who had been dragging chain and handling heavy iron pieces for years. His greasy hands, hair follicles and pores super-saturated with oils, grime and ferrous particles caught and caked in them, no longer felt the long, sharp, and shallow cuts, or the multiple punctures that scalped edges on cams and cogs of highly polished steel and burrs on poorly finished cast iron inflict on human skin.

He had never liked work gloves.

He had not washed his hands for five years.

He tugged at the tangle of chains, of pulleys, of polished parts, of alternately painted and rusty parts that lay scrambled on the concrete driveway next to his house and midway between the street and his garage. He was pulling the mass toward the garage when it occurred to him that it would make a very beautiful sculpture. He would have to affix one end to the top of an A-frame, arrange the chains like runners of Virginia Creeper and then tie weights at the bottom of each of the chains so that they would hang taut. He could call it *Agua Viva* because it would remind him of the jellyfish that inhabit the waters off Puerto Rico.

There was a good A-frame in the shed. Too good in fact. He would have to cover part of the frame under plastic while he hosed the A-frame down to induce some rust, and he would probably have to distress the A-frame with the peen side of one of his hammers to chip away the industrially baked-on enamel paint.

You had to transform the A-frame to make the whole piece harmonious. Otherwise it would be two separate elements—one of pretty painted parts and one of junk. The A-frame had to be distressed, yes. Distress can turn the dull to beauty.

Iron and steel do not tangle like thread, cord or rope. Perhaps chain tangles like logs, and words like jam or snag would be better to describe what happens when links twist out of line and chains of different gauge twine like tresses. Wood has water, or better said, logs have water to propel them part of their way. Professional handlers have winches and pulleys and special vehicles to transport piles like the one the man now dragged up the slightly inclining driveway.

Something hit his face, and he realized that something had hit his body twice before. He looked up to see three boys throwing things at him that he could not immediately identify. Nor could he recognize the boys. Were they his son's friends? Where was his son?

"Filthy Fredo, filthy Fredo, ya ya ya-ya-ya," they shouted.

Were they talking to him? Who was "filthy Fredo?" He dropped the mass of chains and took up one of the thrown things. It was a clod of soil with tufts of grass and grass roots holding it together.

"Dirt for the dirty, dirt for the dirty, filth for filthy Fredo," chanted the boys, nearby.

In his hand the sod felt like a pearl compared to the usual objects he handled. He threw it and hit one of the boys squarely on the face, striking both the nose and lips. The boy perhaps eleven, started to cry and bleed at the same time. None ran. The man started forward and the boy, perhaps fourteen years old, decided to run. But the man caught him and clamped one hand on the boy's shoulder at the same time that he brought his other hand open across the boy's head. With a dull "whup," the boy twirled, and the man then shove-kicked the boy down the driveway. The third boy, the youngest of all, was long ago gone.

From across the street a man hollered "Good for you Gonzalez. Welcome back to earth."

What the man across the street knew, and the boys had known, was that the man they all called "filthy Fredo" had never retaliated, had never even chased the taunting teenagers or the ya-ya-yaing younger boys. No wonder they were caught off guard. In fact, before this moment he had never reacted at all, not for five and maybe seven years.

To anything.

Except iron and steel.

Wheels and manhole covers, and grates and wrenches and gagers and rods and gears, and discs and platens and gates, and chucks and clutches and grills, and spools and bobbins, locks and keys, pinions and racks and gaffies, and meat-hooks and ball-joints and shuttles and flycocks and gaffers, and dividers and rasps, and gyroscopes, graters, and gymbals, grab-hooks, and a thousand parts too small or too complex or too divorced from their origin or context or too specialized and thus identifiable only by their creator, cluttered the length and breadth of the walls of his house, of the walls of his garage, of the walls of his shed, and finally, having displaced length and breadth, the pieces also piled and accumulated in corners and centers, so that finally, finally, they even displaced the girth, the very girth of his abode.

His house had become the lair of the iron woodchuck, the hive of the iron bee, the storeroom of the iron squirrel, the complex of chambers of the iron ant.

From wall to wall, from floor to ceiling the mountain of metal was broken only by a thin corridor that was wide enough for the passage of one man at a time and which changed direction as often as a young river in the mountain.

In the beginning—not in the very beginning of his life when he was named Alfredo after months and months of arguing between his mother and father. In that beginning he had been the first son, and his parents had spent a considerable amount of their waking hours, perhaps of their sleeping hours also, in consideration of an appropriate name. By the seventh child, selecting names was less of a problem. In the beginning, "Alfredo" had been agreed to after eight and one half months of arguing, and just fourteen hours before he was born. As soon as he was brought home, his father looked at him all swaddled against the winter and said, "If we were still in Puerto Rico, he would not wear so much clothing, and oddly, I would find him bigger. Now he looks so small that I, I think I shall call him Fredo."

The boys were cruel and called him filthy Fredo, thus facing a creature they only partly recognized and did not understand. The scientists created chains of *-noias* and *-phrenias* and complicated sprockets of interlocking phrases to describe Fredo. In the end—after a year—they released him as "traumatized" but "harmless," and on the cover of the file folder that contained his dossier there was a number, a date, and the simple phrase "returned to community." There was no name on the face of the folder, but perhaps the letters GON were an abbreviation for "Gonzalez" rather than an abbreviation for "Gone."

But in the beginning of the iron collecting, he had brought the pieces home after much thinking, hesitation, selection and bartering. Then he would spend hours removing paint or rust, applying naval jelly or a torch and wire brush depending on the need. And he would hang the pieces, leaving "air" around each piece so that it could "breathe" and be seen both in the beauty of its form, composition and harmony, its exquisite proportions, or in its indivisible simplicity, in its own beauty, and in relation to the other members of the displayed collection. And he kept notebooks, assigning a number, noting measurements, weights, a description of the object, what metal it was, its uses or purpose, if he knew it, and its provenance, if he knew that. A price and date would be entered if it was a purchase, and if it had been found or given to him, the place found, or the name of the giver. Finally, if any appeared, the maker's mark, and if known, who that mark belonged to. There generally was a drawing or a photograph as well.

Thus in the beginning, the interest in collecting had been a pleasure and a hobby and even a science—sometimes the avid amateur can be more thorough than the museum professional. And the iron had occupied a portion of his life space, his time, his psyche, his physical space. Now it was iron and steel wall to wall—one of a kind decaying next to scrap, art under decoration under function under technology under dross, all in an incubator—no, a compost. And parallel to this total displacement of his physical space iron had totally replaced his time or blocked or separated him from time. As if time in its rigid tick tock trajectory were thwarted by the crumpled metallic maze. Or perhaps the magnetic mass was so great it created a false true north for time. Or perhaps time entering the irrational dimension of this prodigious pile was bent the way sun rays refract through angled glass and then cannot escape the greenhouse.

Alfredo Gonzalez, mostly known as Fredo, also known as "filthy Fredo," entered his house and was shocked at the disorder. It was as if he had entered a tight stack section of a library with a minimum walk space between the stacks. But there were neither books nor shelves, just piles of metal objects—from clockworks to the flywheel of a tractor, to the cap piece of a massive boiler. There was barely a path among the piles of objects. He switched on a lamp that was made from a cast-iron newel post that he had assembled in 1959, but it would not light. Neither would any others when he could reach around the mountains of objects to try switches.

Had it not been for the newel post he would not have believed he was in his own home. He worked his way to the telephone, which buried under dirt and grease, did not work. Neither was there water or gas in the kitchen and the windows were opaque. The meager grey light that filtered through was further defeated by the piles and piles of objects on the available counter space and leaning in rows against the cabinets on the floors. He could not locate the refrigerator.

He remembered that his hallway bathroom had two windows. But even there the light was insufficient to illuminate his image in the mirror. He opened one half of one window with a small pry bar that lay behind the commode. And he turned and gazed in the mirror—what he saw there stopped his heart.

In the mirror was the head and shoulders of a man who had not bathed, shaven, or shorn his hair for five or more years and who had not seen himself in that time either.

He reacted by looking at his hands, one of which still held the pry bar. In disbelief, he raised his hands and looked again in the mirror. The hands matched, and then there was an explosion. The hand holding the pry bar had come down on the mirror creating everything from glass dust to splinters to large chunks which still held the bizarre face.

Fredo gasped, and his breath came short and with difficulty, as if he had been running. His head whirled with fear, with incomprehension with loathing with disorientation with dread. He was about to pass out when he saw the figure of the teenage boy go up the driveway.

The boy was spraying gasoline over the shed, the garage, and even on the pile of chains still at the upper end of the driveway as Fredo came around the house. When the boy saw filthy Fredo he panicked and quickly lit the book of matches which at once ignited the boy's hands and one of his trouser legs.

Fredo pushed the boy down to the ground and away from the gasoline. He was less concerned with the boy than with keeping the gasoline from igniting, although when he contemplated the shed and garage they were crammed solid containers of spare parts with very little to burn—a bit of residue of grease or oil. The structures themselves were of wood as one would expect from a man who loved iron and would have nothing but contempt for aluminum siding or pre-fab metal panels. He remembered now that he had read in one of his books on iron:

One would expect to find few samples of ancient iron works, and many of brass and bronze. However the reverse is true, for nothing is as destructive as man, and while time has a ferocious effect on badly cured and maintained forged or cast iron, man has an even more pernicious effect on brass and bronze. Because they are more precious and often employed by men of war, ornate baptistry doors and colossal cannons are subject to remelting and reworking. Works of art become works of war, in turn plain shields are converted to decorative serving platters. Iron, properly forged and cured, watches implacably resisting wave after wave of heat and cold, army after army.

The neighbor from across the street was spraying the boy on the ground with a huge fire extinguisher. "Serves 'm right:" the neighbor was saying, then turning his extinguisher onto the non-burning gasoline and the yet to be assembled sculpture called "Agua Viva" and winking "just in case, you never know." He seemed to be enjoying the steady rope of white foam uncoiling from the extinguisher.

"What do you want to do with this boy?"

Fredo wanted to say "nothing" but no sound came from him. When he tried again a very guttural noise that sounded like "teen" came out.

He had not spoken in over five years.

"Nothing? You wanna do nothing?"

Fredo shook his head yes.

The neighbor helped the boy up and said to him, "Don't ever come in this block again and I won't tell your father the details of this accident. Let's just say one of your jerky friends sprayed you with a fire extinguisher after you lit up a can of lighter fluid. And for god's sake leave this man alone."

"Tell me Fredo, have you looked at yourself in a mirror today? Because you are not the man in the mirror. I know you Fredo—come over to my house I'll give you a haircut, a shave, a cold beer, you can take a bath—two baths, and I'll tell you what I think happened to you. Do you

hear me Fredo? Do you understand?" Fredo shook his head and made a sound like a hack saw on cast iron. It was "yes."