A World of Fiction

SIXTEEN TIMELESS SHORT STORIES

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Margarita Mondrus Engle
(b. 1951)

Margarita Mondrus Engle was born in California. As a child, she heard her mother tell many stories about Cuba. She learned to appreciate her Cuban heritage which features in much of her work. In addition to writing for both young and adult readers, Engle has worked as a journalist and a botanist. She was the first Hispanic writer to win the Newbery Honor for outstanding youth fiction, which she received for *The Surrender Tree* (2008). She has also written books in verse, including *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano* and *The Wild Book* (2012), a novel for young readers. In addition, Engle has written two historical novels for adults, *Singing to Cuba* and *Skywriting*. 
My mother was afraid it might be our last chance to visit her family in Cuba. The revolution\(^1\) was almost two years old, and already there was talk of an impending\(^2\) crisis. At the airport in Miami she gave us three instructions.

“Never tell anyone you are tomboys.”\(^3\)

“Why?”

“They wouldn’t understand. Also, don’t tell the other children about your allowance.\(^4\) You have more money in the bank than their fathers make in a year.”

“So?”

“So, they would feel bad.”

“Oh.”

“And most important, don’t bring animals into your grandmother’s house.”

“But Mom...”

“No animals. They don’t like having animals in the house. Do you understand?”

At the airport in Havana we released the caterpillars\(^5\) we had hidden in our luggage.

“Just in case there are no butterflies here,” my sister and I reassured each other.

We had no idea what to expect, but the island did not disappoint us. Abuelita’s\(^6\) house was on the outer fringe of Havana,\(^7\) and there were animals everywhere. We put lizards in beds, and tarantulas and scorpions\(^8\) in the living room. The fisherman who lived across the street gave us a ripe swordfish snout\(^9\) to play with. When it really started to stink, my mother threw it on the roof, where it rotted quickly in the sun.

The fisherman’s daughter asked me if I had money for ice cream.

“Yes,” I said with pride, “I have eighty dollars in the bank, which I saved all by myself.”
“Dollars? Really?” I could see she didn’t believe a word of it. I squirmed inside, remembering my mother’s admonition.

“Well, I have something better,” the girl offered. “Crabs. When my father gets home, you can have one to cook for your dinner.”

She was right, of course. The crabs were better than my money. Her father came home with a truckload of them, bright orange crabs as big as cats. We put ours on a leash and led it up and down the street until it died.

My sister liked dogs better than crabs. She begged my mother for a can of dog food for my great-grandmother’s mangy hound. We had to go all the way downtown, to Woolworth’s, just to find dog food in cans. It cost more than a month’s supply of real food, corn meal, black beans and rice.

Just to make sure there were no sins left uncommitted, I went across the street and told the fisherman’s daughter I was a tomboy.

“Oh no,” she said, horrified. “You’re not a tomboy, don’t worry. You will be fine.” She fluffed her petticoats and curled a lock of hair with her fingers.

My collection of revolutionary bullets was growing. They were everywhere—in Abuelita’s front yard and in the weeds where we searched for tarantulas, which we caught with wads of gum attached to strings. There were bullets in the open fields beyond the city, and in the passion vines which clung to the walls of houses.

On one of my solitary expeditions I wandered far beyond those walls, beyond the open fields, and into a mud-floored hut with a thatched roof and many inhabitants. The family greeted me as if I had some right to invade their home. The children came outside to introduce me to their mule, their chickens and the sensitive Mimosa plant which closed its leaves at the touch of a child’s fingers.

One of the children was called Niña, meaning “girl.” I assumed her parents had simply run out of names by the time they got around to her. In Niña’s case, her name was no more unusual than her appearance. She was hardly there, just bones and eyes, and a few pale wisps of hair bleached by malnutrition.
“Doesn’t she get enough to eat?” I asked my mother when I reached home.

“They say she has a hole in her stomach.”

One day I was standing in the sun of the front porch, watching a black storm cloud sweep across the sky, bringing toward me its thunder and lightning, which fell only in one small corner of the sky. A motionless circle of vultures hung from the cloud, listless, with black wings barely trembling in the wind.

“Come in,” my mother warned. “Don’t forget your uncle who was killed by lightning, right in his own kitchen.”

I ignored her. If it could happen in the kitchen, then why bother to go inside? I was just as safe outside.

Niña crept up to the porch, smiling her death’s head smile, like the skull and crossbones on a bottle of medicine.

“Here,” she said, offering me half of the anon fruit she was eating. I took it. Together we ate and stared and smiled at each other, not knowing what to say. We both knew my half of the seedy, juicy fruit was going into my body, making flesh and fat, while hers was going right out the gaping invisible hole in her stomach.

Something like a shiver passed through my shoulders.

“Someone stepped on your grave,” Niña giggled.

“What do you mean?”

“They say when you shiver like that it’s because someone stepped on the spot where your grave will be.”

I stared at Niña’s huge eyes, wondering who could have been cruel enough to inform her that she would ever have a grave.

When we trooped down the street to the bingo games at my great-grandmother’s house, Niña tagged along. An endless array of uncles and cousins filed in and out, a few boasting revolutionary beards and uniforms, but most outfitted in their farmers’ Sunday best, their hands brown and calloused.

Niña was quiet. She poured burnt-milk candy through the hole in her stomach, and watched. The size of her eyes made her watching feel like staring, but no one seemed to notice. Children like Niña surprised no one.
On the anniversary of the revolution, the streets filled with truckloads of bearded men on their way to the mountains to celebrate. A man with a loudspeaker walked along our street announcing the treachery of the Yanquis. I was listening inside my grandmother’s house. Suddenly his voice changed.

“Let me clarify,” he was saying, “that it is not the common people of the United States who we oppose, but the government which has...” I stopped listening. Niña was at the open door, smiling her bony smile.

“I told him,” she said very quietly, “that you are from Estados Unidos. I didn’t want him to hurt your feelings.”

At the beach, my sister and I went swimming inside shark fences. We imagined the gliding fins beyond the fence. Afterwards, our mother extracted the spines of bristly sea urchins from the soles of our feet.

We visited huge caverns gleaming with stalactites. How wonderfully the Cuban Indians must have lived, I thought, with no home but a cave, nothing to eat but fruit and shellfish, nothing to do but swim and sing. “We were born a thousand years too late,” I told my sister.

With a square old-fashioned camera, I took pictures of pigs, dogs, turkeys, horses and mules. Not once did it occur to me to put a friend or relative into one of my photos. I was from Los Angeles. There were more than enough people in my world, and far too few creatures. When my uncle cut sugarcane, it was the stiff, sweet cane itself which caught my eye, and the gnats clinging to his eyes. His strong arms and wizened face were just part of the landscape. When my cousins picked mamonsillo fruit, it was the tree I looked at, and not the boys showing off by climbing it. I thrived on the wet smell of green land after a rain, and the treasures I found crawling in red mud or dangling from the leaves of weeds and vines. I trapped lizards, netted butterflies, and once, with the help of my sister, I snared a vulture with an elaborate hand-rigged snare. Our relatives were horrified. What could one do with a vulture? It was just the way I felt about everything which mattered to them.
If the goal of the revolution was to uproot happy people from their thatched havens, and deposit them in concrete high-rise apartment buildings, who needed it? Thatched huts, after all, were natural, wild, primitive. They were as good as camping. When my mother explained that the people living in the bohíos[^42] were tired of it, I grew sulky[^43]. Only an adult would be foolish enough to believe that any normal human being could prefer comfort to wildness, roses to weeds, radios to the chants of night-singing frogs.

I knew the hole in Niña’s stomach was growing. She was disappearing, vanishing before my eyes. Her parents seemed resigned to her departure[^44]. People spoke of her as if she had never really been there. Niña was not solid. She didn’t really exist.

On the day of her death, it occurred to me to ask my mother, “Why didn’t they just take her to a doctor?”

“They had no money.”

I went out to the front porch, abandoning the tarantula I had been about to feed. As I gazed across the open fields toward Niña’s bohío[^45], the reality of her death permeated[^46] the humid summer air. In my mind, I sifted through a stack[^46] of foals and ducks, caterpillars and vultures. Somewhere in that stack, I realized, there should have been an image of Niña.

[^42]: bohíos: huts (Spanish)
[^43]: grew sulky: acted upset
[^44]: seemed resigned to her departure: seemed to accept that she would die
[^45]: permeated: spread throughout
[^46]: sifted through a stack: looked through a pile
B Understanding the Plot

Be prepared to answer the following questions with a partner or your class.
1. Why did the narrator’s mother want to visit Cuba right away?
2. What three rules does the mother give her daughters before they arrive in Cuba? Do they obey these instructions?
3. Why doesn’t the fisherman’s daughter believe what the narrator says about her money in the bank?
4. Why doesn’t the narrator’s great-grandmother give canned food to her dog?
5. Is the fisherman’s daughter a tomboy? (line 47) Explain your answer.
6. What signs of the revolution does the narrator see everywhere she goes?
8. Why is Niña so thin?
9. What does the narrator mean when she says, “Children like Niña surprised no one”? (lines 100–101)
10. Why does the man with the loudspeaker suddenly change what he is saying about Americans?
11. What do you think the man said next about the U.S. government? Explain your answer. (lines 107–109)
12. What kind of work do the narrator’s relatives do? Give evidence for your answer.
13. What do all the photographs the narrator took in Cuba have in common? (lines 122–130)
14. What happens to Niña?
15. What does the narrator regret at the end of the story?

PART 2 CRITICAL THINKING

A Exploring Themes

Reread “Niña.” Then answer the following questions, which explore the story more deeply.
1. How has the narrator changed by the end of her visit to Cuba?
2. In what ways is the narrator an invader when she visits Niña’s home? (line 58)
3. Niña and the narrator seem to be about the same age, but their lives and personalities are very different. Compare and contrast the girls in as many ways as possible.
4. There are a number of direct and indirect references to death in the story. Find as many as you can and explain their significance to the story.
5. Explain the significance of Niña’s name. (line 62)
B Analyzing Style

**FIRST-PERSON POINT OF VIEW**

We see the events of a story from a particular point of view. In “Niña” the narration is in the first person, meaning that the story is told using the pronoun I. Stories told in the first person only give us the perspective of the character who narrates the events. As a result, they are necessarily subjective rather than objective.

Since we see the story through the eyes of a young girl, we have to remember that she doesn’t understand much of what she sees during her visit to Cuba. For example, when the narrator and her sister trap a vulture for fun (lines 133–134), she doesn’t understand why her Cuban relatives react badly. From the point of view of her poor relatives, catching an animal that can’t be sold or eaten is a waste of time.

Exercise

Answer the following questions.

1. Give several examples of how the narrator’s youth influences her perspective on life in Cuba.
2. The narrator and her mother have very different perspectives on life in Cuba. Find at least two examples that show the contrast between their points of view.
3. Contrast the narrator’s romantic fantasy of Cuban life with the reality of her relatives’ existence.
4. When the narrator asks her mother why Niña wasn’t taken to the doctor, what does the narrator reveal about herself? (lines 149–150)

C Judging for Yourself

Express yourself as personally as you like in your answers to the following questions.

1. How old do you think the narrator is? Explain your answer.
2. Why do you think the narrator’s mother emigrated from Cuba to the United States?
3. What do you think the narrator’s cousins in Cuba will tell their friends about their American relatives?
4. Do you think the narrator’s trip to Cuba will affect how she thinks and acts in the future? Explain your answer.
D Making Connections

Answer the following questions in a small group.

1. Niña mentions the superstition (popular belief about luck) that when a person shivers, it means someone has stepped on his or her future grave. What superstitions do you have in your country?

2. There are many stereotypes (extreme generalizations) about American tourists. For example, many people think Americans don’t know or care much about other cultures. How are American visitors viewed in your country? Do you agree with these stereotypes? How do you think people from your country are viewed when they travel abroad?

3. Has your country experienced a revolution in the last hundred years? If so, explain the circumstances.

4. In your country, is medical care easily available to everybody? Briefly describe the medical system in your country. Say whether you think it works well or whether it needs to be improved.

E Debate

Decide whether you are for or against the following statement. Write several arguments that support your view. Share your points with a classmate who has taken the opposite position.

Rural life is better than urban life.

PART 3 GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT

ADJECTIVE CLAUSES

An adjective clause is a dependent clause, meaning that it cannot be a sentence on its own. Like all clauses, an adjective clause must have a subject and a verb. Adjective clauses function as adjectives and modify (describe) a noun in another clause. They add details and give more information about nouns. Most adjective clauses are introduced by the relative pronouns who, whom, whose, which, or that. In the following examples, the adjective clause is in bold and the noun it modifies is underlined.

1. Who, whom, and whose refer to people. In informal English, you can sometimes use that instead of who or whom.

   • Use who when the pronoun is the subject of the adjective clause.

   The fisherman who lived across the street gave us a ripe swordfish snout to play with. (lines 25–26)
• Use whom when the pronoun is the object of the adjective clause. In spoken English, you frequently hear who instead of whom.

The fisherman whom we saw daily gave us a ripe swordfish snout to play with.

• Use whose when the pronoun is possessive.

The family whose daughter was sick couldn’t afford a doctor.

2. That and which refer to animals, things, and ideas. They can act as the subject or object of an adjective clause. Sometimes you can use either that or which. However, do not use that directly after a comma.

“I have eighty dollars in the bank, which I saved all by myself.” (lines 30–31)

I looked up at the vultures that were flying in the sky.

3. When you use that or whom as an object, if it isn’t separated from the word it modifies by a comma, you can omit the pronoun.

At the airport in Havana we released the caterpillars [that] we had hidden in our luggage. (lines 18–19)

Exercise 1

Complete the following sentences with the correct relative pronoun. Use the rules that apply to formal English in your answers.

1. Their grandmother’s house, ______________________ was on the outer edge of Havana, was an exciting place to explore.

2. I was introduced to the girl ______________________ had a hole in her stomach.

3. After I talked about the money ______________________ I had saved, I regretted it.

4. My relatives, ______________________ I had never met, were very kind to me.

5. My photographs failed to show the people ______________________ houses I had visited.

6. The crabs ______________________ we ate were the best I’d ever had.

7. My mother, ______________________ knew about Cuba, gave us instructions on how to behave.

8. Our mother removed the needles ______________________ were hurting our feet.

9. The children brought their dog, ______________________ approached us curiously.

10. The revolutionaries ______________________ we met treated us politely.
Exercise 2

Underline each adjective clause in the following sentences. Draw an arrow to the noun or pronoun it modifies. Circle the relative pronoun. The first one is done for you as an example.

1. There was talk of an impending crisis that could threaten the two-year-old revolution. (adapted from lines 2–3)
2. . . . we searched for tarantulas, which we caught with wads of gum attached to strings. (lines 52–53)
3. The children came outside to introduce me to the sensitive Mimosa plant . . . which closed its leaves at the touch of a child’s finger. (lines 58–61)
4. The vulture, whose black wings were barely trembling in the wind, hung from the cloud. (adapted from lines 73–74)
5. “Don’t forget your uncle who was killed by lightning, right in his own kitchen.” (lines 75–76)
6. We visited huge caverns whose interiors were gleaming with stalactites. (adapted from line 117)
7. I thrived on the treasures I found crawling in red mud. (adapted from lines 130–133)
8. It was just the way I felt about everything which mattered to them. (adapted from lines 135–136)
9. I went out to the front porch, abandoning the tarantula that I had been about to feed. (lines 152–153)
10. Somewhere in that stack, I realized, there should have been an image of Niña, whom I greatly missed. (adapted from lines 156–157)

Exercise 3

Which sentence in each of the following pairs is often considered incorrect in formal English? Rewrite it.

1. a. “The common people of the United States are not the people who we oppose.” (adapted from lines 107–108)
   b. “The common people of the United States are not the people who oppose us.”
2. a. I want to write letters to my relatives who live in Cuba.
   b. I want to write letters to my relatives who I met in Cuba.

Exercise 4

Complete the following sentences with an appropriate adjective clause.

1. Many people prefer living in a neighborhood __________________________.
2. My parents, __________________________, took years to feel comfortable in the United States.
3. Our cousin, ________________, comes from Havana.
4. Summer fruit ________________________ tastes wonderful.
5. Families ________________________ often face many difficulties.
6. The noise ________________________ prevents me from sleeping.
7. Istanbul is a city ________________________.
8. I love the artist ________________________.

PART 4 VOCABULARY BUILDING

DESCRIPTIVE VERBS

Although Margarita Engle writes simple sentences, she uses many descriptive verbs in “Niña.” These verbs not only push the action along, they also have an effect similar to adjectives, adding richness and color to her writing. For example, when Engle writes that the narrator squirmed inside (line 33), the verb suggests two meanings at once. The first meaning is nervously move from side to side. The second meaning is feel embarrassed. Since we think about both meanings at the same time, the verb adds a descriptive layer to the writing, helping us understand how the girl feels inside.

Exercise 1

Use your dictionary or the footnotes to define each of the following verbs as it is used in the story.

1. reassure (line 21) ________________________
2. stink (line 27) ________________________
3. wander (line 55) ________________________
4. invade (line 58) ________________________
5. bother (line 77) ________________________
6. creep (line 79) ________________________
7. clarify (line 107) ________________________
8. extract (line 115) ________________________
9. vanish (line 146) ________________________
10. gaze (line 153) ________________________
Exercise 2

Match each verb from Exercise 1 with its appropriate context. The first one is done for you.

4. a. enter enemy territory
   b. have no particular direction in mind
   c. help someone understand a difficult concept
   d. walk late into a movie theater
   e. make someone feel better
   f. deal with a bee sting
   g. look into someone’s eyes
   h. leave food in the garbage for too long
   i. leave home without telling anyone
   j. make an effort

Exercise 3

Complete the following sentences with the correct verb from Exercise 1. Use each verb only once.

1. Don’t ______________________ taking off your shoes. We’ll be leaving again in a few minutes.
2. Why does it ______________________ in here? You should open a window.
3. The dentist is going to ______________________ two of my teeth today.
4. A magician can make something ______________________ in front of your eyes.
5. I want to stay here and ______________________ at the ocean until the sun goes down.
6. When I visit a new city, I like to ______________________ around without using a map.
7. Philosophers argue about whether one country should ever ______________________ another one.
8. I don’t understand your plan. Please ______________________ how it will work.
9. Many people are scared of animals that ______________________ along the ground.
10. My doctor called to ______________________ me that the problem isn’t serious.
Exercise 4

Find five more verbs in the story that help us picture what is happening. Use each verb in a sentence.

PART 5  WRITING ACTIVITIES

1. Choose a place you have visited where the people were very different from you. Describe the main differences between you and the people there. Say whether you learned something about yourself from the visit.

2. Have you ever had a fantasy about living in a different place or time? Maybe you have imagined living in a different city or country, in nature, or even in a different century. Describe your fantasy and give the reasons for your choice. Try to use some adjective clauses in your writing.

3. Many books and films deal with culture shock, which is the feeling of confusion caused by being in a place where people are very different from you. Sometimes the contrast is presented with humor, and other times it is shown in a more serious light. In the movie *Lost in Translation*, two Americans in Japan become close to each other while experiencing culture shock. Pick a book you have read or a movie you have seen that deals with this subject. Describe the situation. Say whether you think the book or movie deals sensitively with the cultural differences.