

Finding Cuba, by Jill Pelaez Baumgaertner

reviewed by [Peggy Rosenthal](#) in the [April 10, 2002](#) issue

Josephine Jacobsen says that she began writing poetry when she had experiences for which no adequate language existed. Only a new poem, she discovered, could reach toward the reality she had experienced. In the opening section of Jill Peláez Baumgaertner's new collection of poems, *Finding Cuba*, this function of poetry is inventively extended to experiences that belong not to the poet but to her Cuban ancestors. Born in the U.S., Baumgaertner seeks to find the Cuba in herself by finding language for the inner life of her forebears. Her initial knowledge of their lives is limited to a few facts, photos and anecdotes. But a poet's knowledge is mainly through the imagination, and this poet has imagination in abundance.

Baumgaertner's imagination is most animated by her paternal grandmother, who came to Cuba in 1905 as a young Irish-American, married a Cuban and stayed through years of a conventional marriage. ("She thought she might die wrapped in such whiteness.") But then she fled, and became a Ziegfeld girl. In her longing to know this mysteriously adventurous woman, Baumgaertner shares memories--even memories of "something that never happened"--by finding images that evoke them. The tour de force of *Finding Cuba* is that its poems make an imagined past seem more sparkingly vivid and urgent than most people's present lives.

In "Leaving Eden," the book's second section, the poet continues to explore themes of memory and identity, of female creative energy, and of the mysterious power of language. An interwoven sequence of poems starts in the biblical garden, then--in a bold move that Baumgaertner makes seem natural--follows Adam and Eve through a series of post-Eden vignettes set in the contemporary world.

Poets have always reconceived their culture's great stories, and Baumgaertner is no exception. She reenvisions leaving Eden as an opportunity instead of a loss. The poet's Eve seizes the chance to discover what her human identity means, especially in relation to language, to thought, and in relation to Adam as the other who

mysteriously completes her. Adam, meanwhile, desires and needs Eve even as he senses that he doesn't quite comprehend her. The poet casts their relation with tender delicacy. Though Adam lacks Eve's capacity of integrating mind, body and spirit, still--in a gesture of love--"he moves close for her interpretation."

From the moment in the garden when they are given the power to name things, Eve is intrigued. She realizes that the power to name is also the power to create one another's identity. In "She, Outside," for instance, "Adam stands at the open/ door of shirts" deciding which to wear, thinking of Eve coming to meet him and wondering "what will be the same and what will have changed so much/ he will not know how to name it." Eve, listening to a cantata on the radio as she drives home, "considers that he is filled/ with images from what she once was/ before she ever really was," and decides that the image of an aria, turning back upon itself, best names who she and Adam are in relation to each other.

Baumgaertner pursues her vision of humans creatively wresting meaning out of relationships, and out of the mind working through the sounds and images and rhythms of language. In the book's final poem, "Galatea," the poet imagines the myth of Pygmalion from the viewpoint of Galatea. Galatea echoes the volume's other main characters--the poet's grandmother and Eve--women creating their lives and being created; women pondering how their physical selves shape what lies "under the skin."

I will return often to these richly evocative poems to meditate on the mysteries for which they offer new language, new experience.