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Amigoland by Oscar Casares. (New York: Back Bay Books, 2010. 384 pp. \$14.99 paper)

Nursing-home life can make for inactive literature. The canon is thick with the loss of innocence, but it has less to say about its state, lost or found, near the end of life.

Whether this springs from the declining existence of the later years, or the inevitable turn inwards, or the palliative clichés that accompany the waning decades—whatever the blame, there is no Huckleberry Finn of the elderly.

Amigoland, Oscar Casares's first novel and a follow-up to his well-regarded story collection, *Brownsville*, is a dignified if tepid entry into the genre of octogenarian fiction. Casares gives us two brothers: Don Fidencio, a cantankerous member of the elderly ward of the title, and his younger brother Don Celestino, recently widowed but still feisty enough to begin an affair with his cleaning lady, Socorro. The brothers are estranged, but as Don Fidencio becomes desperate to leave the home, and Socorro encourages her lover to engage his brother as a means of burrowing into his life, the two are pushed together.

So far, so mild. Fortunately for both him and us, Don Fidencio remembers a story told by his grandfather about being captured by Indians and taken across a river to what turned out to be America. The provenance of this tale is in question—Don Fidencio's failing memory may be corrupting the story, which itself might have been a fable from the start.

But the mystery of the brothers' heritage is enough for Don Celestino to break his sibling out of *Amigoland* and travel to the interior of Mexico to explore their origins.

Here, *Amigoland* wakes up. Casares has some fun early on with the Catch-22-esque absurdities of institutional life, but for the most part, being in the heads of cranks is about as pleasant as being in the room with them, and the prose drags. Once the brothers are on the road, however—grappling with border agents, Mexican street vendors, the infamously loose pharmacies of Matamoros—Casares suddenly has a vibrant, prickly world to work with. Here's his quick gloss of a Mexican street beggar:

A young man with tire shanks for knees crawled between the cars, hustling along the pavement to catch up to an arm reaching out with a few pesos.

There we go! Casares' beggar with the fake knees is still more capable of action than the disembodied arm giving him charity. That's a fierce image, and the novel could have used more of those and fewer of these: "...the stars above him like bits of cotton sprinkled across the dark sky."

The last third of the novel is a Virgilian quest through the Underworld to which rural Mexico can't help but be compared. Don Fidencio is still not Huck Finn seeing the Mississippi for the first time, but he has his moments: defending a small Mexican child who had been scamming him from a border agent and tracking the trail of an elusive and possibly illusionary ranch until he locates an old blind woman who remembers his grandfather.

The blind woman is a bit much—this text already has a pair of Aeneids; it doesn't need a Tiresias as well—but she enlivens the denouement, in which she and Don Fidencio sit and retell, misrecall, and sometimes reinvent his grandfather's story. The two tell a tale, in other words, and Casares wonderfully instantiates the power of fiction to find the truths in memories lost to the mind. It's a powerful coda to what, until then, had been merely a simmering story, and it grants to two people leaving this world some of the wonder they had when they entered it.