

EXILIADOS

“Exile was a form of innocence, an absence of lucidity for good or evil, a suspension in time...”

— José Lezama Lima, *Paradiso*

We were staying just west of Havana and, on our second day of our vacation, mid-morning, we set out for a walk. I had my camera with me of course. It was hot. Sultry. In front of the hotel, came the sound of boys, whooping and laughing and cajoling. I hunted the sound. And even though the handball wall was less than five minutes away, I was sweaty by the time I got there. There were ten maybe fifteen boys, a handful playing, the rest watching or talking or hanging off of each other.

I had never seen handball before — like tennis without the racquets, where shirtless boys chase the fuzzy tennis ball and beat it with clenched fists, pectorals leaping, biceps flaring. *Por favor*, could I take some photos, I asked the boys. As always, they good-naturedly posed and flashed me happy peace signs and gave me the ubiquitous thumbs up. I picked out one of the leaders and explained to him in my rough Spanish that I wanted natural pictures. Not posing. He explained to his compatriots, whence they returned to their gossip, their watching, their joyous ribbing and cavorting, their sport. Sweat and tropic heat set upon their sun-burnished bodies, upon their fierce faces as they ran and leaped and twisted.

For the handball boys, for any Cuban, *los exiliados* means any Cuban who has left their motherland. The word has been used to express many things — envy and resentment, embarrassment and shame. This is not my meaning. I mean they are the exiles of the world. And as the exiles of the world, the Cubans, and in particular the Cuban boys, are mad burning fierce independent creatures unspoiled by excess or luxury. These *exiliados* are not Cain evicted from Adam's exile. Neither are they Adam exiled from Eden. To me, they are more like young Adams, if paradise could also be a prison, exiled to Eden. It is true, I am an outsider; a tourist in exile cannot know exile. And unquestionably, concerning

politics and socio-economics, it might be a wild stretch to call Cuba a paradise. But in this exile country I see more passion, more joy, more living than I have seen anywhere else. Aye, what blissful revel.

And oh the boys. It's excruciating, really, like staring into the midday sun, to see the boys. But there are too many. And they are all too vital, too thrilling. I have neither enough senses nor enough time to fathom them all. Let's pluck out one, then, this boy, this *exiliado*. Innocent after a fashion. Lithe, taut, sun-burnished. And what a demonstration of force, the way he moves. *Que rico*. Yes, even the way he walks, reveals him. To see it is to marvel. His machinery must be devised differently than mine, an ancient wild engine buried somewhere in his loins, wherefrom it fires, wherefrom it propels him. I do not walk that way. A coiled spring of maleness. Naked lust surfaces in his face from the dark depths of human origins. His confidence, his self-possession, his *cojones* will not let him falter. Even in the wide open glare of my camera lens, he does not hide. He reveals himself, unflinching, unabashed, unapologetic.

Let me also say that my Cuban friends are also warm and genuine and kind-hearted, and in the face of much personal affliction, generous, generous with their time and their resources and their affections as well. They are not only my Cuban friends, they are my friends.

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