

EXILIO

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

— José Lezama Lima, *Paradiso*

In Cuba, and to Cubans, *exilio* can mean nothing more than those Cubans who left. Exile is out-of-Cuba. And the country knows the word like it knows the words *libre* and *revolución*. And the word, over the years, has imparted, in turns, grief and subjugation, pity and envy, and, yes, shame. Perhaps less now, *los exilados* were *los gusanos*, the worms that left behind their motherland.

But I mean to use the word the other way around, inside out. Cuba is its own exile, that is, exiled from the rest of the world. Not perfectly, how could it be perfect, Cuba is exiled from the world. For good or for bad, how could I say? I could as uselessly ponder if purgatory is for good or bad. This is no treatise, I am not qualified. Politics is for the head most of all and it is my heart wherein I hold Cuba.

I know that I cannot get enough of Cuba. I know that I cannot resist Cuba. When I need to shake my soul, when I need to feel alive and real and vital, when I need to witness life and breathe life and eat life, to Cuba I run. Off the plane, the air hits you, different, altered, heavy, tropical; it permeates everything and takes me quickly. I am welcomed every time in exactly the same way. It is the embrace of an old friend.

La Habana. The words are a magic charm for me. The city enchants me. How can I resist my own sentimentality, my own nostalgia? I am the young lover, beset, transported, thoroughly dispossessed. Ah, the theatre of the city where close-quartered neighbors open wide their doors and windows, where on balconies, women talk of love and scandal, where on the curbs, the men continue their work on their cars, their motorcycles, where, early morning, the children all in gleaming white shirts and gold breeches and blue kerchiefs, carefully tied, head off to school in packs, and a little boy and a little girl linger behind, where, on the Malecón, the edge of the world, young lovers lounge or fight or dream or reconcile, where they all in their part demonstrate, reveal, and, yes, even strut the ordinary stories of life. And that expansive theatre fills

with the smell of diesel and sand and hot metal and with the smell everlasting of ripe tropical air. And the cacophonous orchestra produces in turns, the wheeze of the cars, the squeal of the camel busses, the rise and fall of the talkers and singers and lovers and drinkers and trumpet-players, and the lusty bolero, and the rumba seduction, and the lap and dash, and the lap and dash of the foaming sea at the edge of the world.

I don't mean to be short-sighted. But lovers are always short-sighted. There is no question Cuba needs change. There is no doubt my Cuban friends have challenges I could barely comprehend. And much of the city, much of the country, has little left to do seemingly but resign to neglect and time. If Cuba is theater, the set is a beautiful ruin. The old grand architecture, in its day, beautiful and brazen, majestic, collapsing, collapsed; now flaking facades, cracked columns, broken balconies supported, out of necessity and out of doggedness by wood struts, blocks of concrete. Spackle for the king's corpse.

My perspective is one of privilege. Passing through exile can never be the same as being confined to exile. Still, I submit that Cuba is at once an inescapably flawed and unfailingly beautiful exile. As for the Cubans, even the most hard-done, and there are many, they still love their country. They are fierce and determined, resourceful and resilient. There is an abundance of joy, an abundance of sensuality, an abundance of pride. It is manifest. You cannot help but see it. It is written all over their faces. And says so much more, a single face, than I could ever hope to say here.

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