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LETTER FROM CUBA

by Forrest Hamer

It takes two full days away before I stop worrying about my work.
On the third day, I go back to stops on the tour from the day
before; and by the end of the fourth day, whether I see more
sights no longer matters.
After a week, I think I could leave my life.

I have been here longer than I can say.
There are moments I am in Goldsboro or Mobile or Savannah, and
it is the time we are children and the weather hot, and the
people mostly our family, and the air is fragrant with
flowers, pig slop, and gasoline, and there are crops to be cut.

My heart is nearly breaking.
One afternoon, I sat in the white sand and looked across the
Atlantic.
I thought how long ago some of us ended up here and some of us
ended up there.
Restlessness still washes me over in waves.

Kind and handsome men come up to me to practice their English,
they want to sell me cigars and rum, a cheaper room, a meal
at a cousin's paladar, a woman, themselves.
No, no, I say. I want you to tell me the stories.
We walk or we sit down and eat, and I listen, asking, I'd like
please to practice my Spanish.
When you see me again, my brother, my sister, I will be calmer.

The Yoruba priest tossed cowrie shells several times at my feet,
telling me to make offerings to hold on to my money, to be
protected from accidents, for me to be married.
He told me I could change, if I wanted.
He didn't know what I wanted him to know about me.
And I was surprised to learn what I wanted.

CALLALOO

One day, walking the center of Havana, I tripped and fell to my knees.

I'd been looking up at crumbling buildings, I was listening to music coming from someone's open windows, and I was trying to place a voice.

Everyone moved toward me with concern.

I'm fine, I kept saying in English, thank you.

It's true what they say: there is beautiful music here, and it is everywhere.

There is music some places in the world that makes me wish.

Instead of settling down, I could have wandered.

I could have loved some others; I could have loved much more.

I could have lived other lives.

"Where you from, Martinique? Bahamas? Americano? You like Tupac?"

I'm not sure I know the America they ask me about.

I tell them I listen to the blues. I tell them I listen to opera.

Sometimes, on the way home from work, I hear salsa.

The poet who read only in Spanish made me close my eyes.

I was falling and falling into a voice.

Not knowing her language, I finally heard the poems.

And when it was my turn, *mi hermana, mi hermano*, waters swelled deep within me, and I spoke back.



Abandoned Structure in La Vedado, a Residential Neighborhood of La Habana

Photo by Marcia Minter



Photo by Marcia Minter

Another View of the Abandoned Strucutre in La Vedado