

GUERRA IN SPILINTERS

ELEVEN STORIES FROM THE NEW GUER

Selected and Edited by ORLANDO URS PARRÓ LAZO

Translated by HILLARY SULLY

STUTTERERS AND ADDICTS, SEX AND KNIFE FIGHTS, ZOMBIES

and lost literary classics all appear in *Cuba in Splinters*, an electrifying collection of eleven stories by a new crop of Cuban writers. Largely unknown in the U.S., on their home island they've become known as Generation Year Zero, named for the early years of this millennium and the blank slate on which they scrawl their vision of a new national literature.

They are inspired by American writers—Bukowski, Kerouac, Miller—but the stories, here translated into English for the first time, are 100% Cuban. Take a stroll through a Havana steeped in decay, past oblivious drug-toting German tourists—and beware of zombies masquerading as health inspectors.

Welcome to a raw island fantasy closed to the casual visitor.



ORLANDO LUIS PARDO LAZO blogs at *Lunas de post-Revolución* and publishes photographs at *Boring Home Utopias*. A resident of Havana, he is now living temporarily in the United States, where he gives university lectures about social activism and Cuban civic society using new media.

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Cover design by Steve Altman

Author photograph: OLP, self portrait, 2011



CUBA

IN SPLINTERS

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OR Books
New York • London

Selects of 2011 U.S. House and Senate Elections
and Publications of 2011 by authors
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Cataloging in Publication Data available from the Library of Congress.
A catalog record for this book is available from the author's library.

ISBN 978-1-909293-18-0 paperback
ISBN 978-1-909293-19-7 hardcover

Designed by Bill Caldwell. Typeset by Joseph D'Agostino and
Printed by BookMasters in the U.S.A. and G.P. Sunde Ltd in the U.K.
London. The US printed edition of this book is available from
Columbia University, 27th Street, New York, NY 10003.
Printed by BookMasters, 10003.

CONTENTS

- v Preface
Orlando Leis-Tando-Lara
- vii *Defeat and the Berlin Wall?*
Luigi Almirante Aguiar-Dias
- 13 *Cartoons about September and Covid?*
Luigi Enrico Lago
- 41 *Lecciones Zonas*
Luis René Espinosa
- 49 *Crises as solutions*
Almeida Echeverri-Gent
- 61 *Western Light*
Luis Domínguez Lara
- 73 *Sólo para (Des)ologas for the Year Zero?*
Pablo Martínez-Salazar
- 101 *The Birth Act of the Modern*
Michael Encarnación
- 109 *Thirty seconds of Western Science*
Luis Villares
- 131 *'That Zombie Belongs to Fidel?'*
Erick Muñoz
- 151 *Disarming Zines*
Raúl Flores
- 167 *The Man, the Wolf and the Bear Woods*
Orlando Leis-Tando-Lara
- 179 *Journal Epitaphical*

PREFACE

In the beginning there was the Revolution and the Revolution was Fidel

The year 2000 didn't mean the advent of a new century and millennium in Cuba. On the contrary, it meant the continuance of a paleo-historical process called The Revolution, capital T, capital R. In neon lights, with regard to the international academy. Perversely polarized and pop. With fireworks and firearms. Utopia embodied in a people despite its people. The same Revolution which, since long before its victory on January 1, 1959, confused part with whole and violently occupied every space in society, including its language, erecting a monolithic model, at the top of which still stands Fidel.

Fidel, no last name required. Sometimes euphonic, sometimes fossil, with its intimate and intimidating F. Perversely as elite as it is populist. Omniscient, ubiquitous, all-encompassing Fidel, the Ultimate Narrator of this totalitarian utopia that he has molded to his image and likeness. The Revolution, understood as a national narrative that distances us from the rest of the planet—the Doppler Defect. What has caused us Cubans to be less contemporary: strange vermin forsaken by God and capital. An experimental paradise for anthropological entomology. The Revolution, with its forced, even-handed alacrity, an ideological idyll which, in the twenty-first century, has yet to expire. Expirevolution. During a period that has already lost its own plot.

Wenn ich Kultur höre, entsichere ich meinen Browning

The literature of the Revolution always lacked imagination. I don't know if this was ever attributed to the economic, financial and commercial embargo imposed on our country by the United States—also privately known as the imperialist blockade. Literary rhetoric was therefore forced to adhere to a generic realism: a rosy realism, at times Russian. If literature was to be a “weapon of the Revolution,” then it had to be something that could be armed and disarmed by our most humble workers and farmers. In fact, Cuban literature was assigned the special mission of ceasing to be a spiritual luxury and humbly setting forth to create a literate populace. To be understood by everyone, especially the experts in the political police. This is why the “original sin” of our intellectuals, as an ex-social class, is that of never having been “authentically revolutionary,” according to the gospel of Ernesto Ché Guevara.

This sin must be radically atoned for, and the sooner the better. In the summer of 1961, Fidel stood at the National Library before hundreds of seated intellectuals, laid his fifteen-shot Browning on a desk and proclaimed: “Within the Revolution, everything. Against the Revolution, nothing,” allowing only for a residual “outside” freedom for those who didn't agree with him. With Him. It was clear that in a revolution like the Cuban one, literature was too serious a matter to be left to the men and women of letters.

Within literature, everything. Outside literature, nothing.

In the early 1990s, the fall of the Soviet Union and the European socialist countries put Cuba on the verge of famine and

government concentration camps—the so-called Option Zero of the Special Period of War in Times of Peace. This debacle, however, also brought down the Sugar Curtain; Cuban artists felt the stirrings of liberation. The disassembling of centralized control mechanisms meant that, for the first time since 1959, writers could publish their work abroad without permission from the State. For the first time since 1959, the same State allowed writers to collect royalties without clearing bureaucratic hurdles and obtaining a surreal “trust certificate.” So literature assumed the role the imprisoned press could not, and anthologies of very critical writers were soon published, like that of the *Novísimos* generation: *The Last Shall Be the First* (Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1993), compiled by Salvador Redonet. Pandora’s box was about to open.

The *Paideia* project, the *La Azotea de Reina* gatherings, the magazine *Diáspora(s)*, among many other independent works, burst forth with an energy suppressed during decades of censorship. It was too much: the official reaction involved paramilitary forces from the political police. It was still unthinkable that there could be a literature independent of State Security, its agents being the specialized readers they were. Most of the main writers of this *perestroikuba* were coerced, blackmailed, fired, marginalized, beaten, jailed and obliged to choose between silence or exile. It was an exceptional victory for the cultural policy of the Communist Party (still the only legal political party in our country). In fact, at the beginning of the 2000s, the insular silence was fathomless. Almost none of those artists stayed in Cuba; they fled to fade away abroad, graciously. In the end, there was silence *and* exile. The change of century and millennium in Cuba didn’t bring the 2000s, but the ‘0s. We had to start from zero.

Y2K

Generations don't exist. Generational illusion does. Generation Year Zero, therefore, can be no more than a band of outlaws, of electrons out of orbit, miracles of the marginal view, the residue of writers who didn't belong to the world of writers but to those of the sciences or the streets, and who therefore conducted themselves like squatters. Generation Year Zero is like an album of rare species in danger of extinction, having met in a single city at the same time the date changed from 1990-something to 2000-nothing. a city starting with H, silent but still so *beloquent*, a consonant that's useless for Spanish poetry but that couldn't be better-suited for new narrative.

This city, of course, is still called Havana. And this generation, in trying to write its own Genesis 0:0, didn't aspire to be the first, but the last. XYZ: Xeneration Year Zero. To recount drop by drop. To narrate with aphasia and *infidelity*. To poke around in the black holes denied by dismemory and invent its own tradition. Discubanocracy. To risk their lives, even, to recount the one thousand, nine hundred and fifty-nine nights of a post-homeland nightmare, clinical and cynical symptom of an entire *vocabulary* with which to dynamize and dynamite "Cuban literature" (an oxymoron in quotes).

Words of pixels

The years zero in a Cuba not connected to the Internet were, paradoxically, the Golden Decade of digital magazines. First there was the nearly clandestine boom of independent e-zines, like *Cacharros(s)*, *33 y un Tercio*, *DesLiz*, *La Caja de la China* and *The Revolution Post*, among others. Nearly all of the eleven authors in this anthology first became known by editing and

self-publishing in these underground magazines. A phenomenon that was eminently urban, Havanan and amateur, but with the airs of inhabiting a First World megalopolis: delocalization as a strategy for expressive freedom. An alphabet of bits against analogic barbarism and the *ancien régime* of censorship on paper.

There was an urgency in the writing that prioritized narrative over poetry, and that reduced the essay to almost nothing. Following a twentieth century of megalomaniacal monologues from disciplinary powers, we, in our literary discussions, preferred to avoid any counter-theories. The official uniformed Duty had to be opposed with the Pleasure of multiplicities. The historical and homogenous mass had to be confronted with atomized chaos. Only in this Brownian movement could the hope survive of escaping the static sterility of the state. *Liberature*: a Brownian flight of heretics to survive the Browning belonging to a commander who would never become a cadaver. *Rev in Peace*.

Index & anti-index

This anthology is doubly minimal:

1. Because it does not include all of the writers of this Cuban counter-vanguard. There are many other conceivable 0:0 anthologies, including, for example, Lizabel Mónica, Osdany Morales, Jamila Medina, Ainsley Negrín, Abel Fernández-Larrea, Arnaldo Muñoz Viquillón, Legna Rodríguez, Evelyn Pérez, Carlos Esquivel and Agnieszka Hernández (in the summer of 2013, I compiled the writing of some of these authors for *Sampsonia Way Magazine* of City of Asylum/Pittsburgh). These ten absences also belong to the margin of the national mainstream and dialogue polyphonically with the eleven

presences included here: Jorge Alberto Aguiar Díaz, Jorge Enrique Lage, Jhortensia Espineta, Ahmel Echevarría Peré, Lien Carrazana Lau, Polina Martínez Shviétsova, Michel Encinosa Fú, Lia Villares, Erick J. Mota, Raúl Flores and myself. We are twenty-one dissident ghosts who roam and eat away, like cannibals, at the Cuban Caribbean of a twenty-first century that is just getting started. The local color still oversaturates everything, not only because of the island's institutional inertia, but perhaps because the foreign market only asks for more and more of this same Cuban bubble that grows and grows without ever bursting: typical topics, common characters, stereotypical settings and more than familiar forms. In the face of such mediocrity on the part of the media we don't need a good author: we need daring narrators who can be as uncomfortable as needles on end and awaken good readers to what they've been missing.

2. To produce a maximum intensity impact. Against totalitarianism's somber sequel, the sudden slap of a tweet. Cuba in 140 characters or less.

Havana, AC (After Castro)

It is possible that this anthology is the portrait of a family that never was. The communicating vessels between these eleven stories are not bridges, but short-circuits: affinities, violence, tensions between text and anti-text which, coinciding in the same book, produce a collision that consumes its own meaning, generating light. A radiating, incandescent zero of patria-plasma.

From the Berlin Wall to the wall of the Florida Strait. From Fideozoic-era bodyguards to sex for sale at a regional train station.

Snob Buddhism and sub-socialist zombies, Cuba in splinters of a turbulent insanity that traverses everything: like an ethical axis, kinetic. Fractal stories, allegorical anecdotes that are the continuation of others written by others without clarifying who is who and which is which: plagiarism or provocation? Smoke or pills so the mind can emigrate before the body, beyond the claustrophobic line of the horizon while still inside the claustrophilic skin of an uncivilized citizenship. Hiroshimavana, *mon amour*, the cenotaph city. Remake and collage, coda and epitaph for a *cadavre exquis* who will drink of the wine to come as the future fast forward begins to rewind. No one knows what past awaits us. Antepenultimate visions of the *holocaustro*. This anthology couldn't be anything but the portrait of this family that will always be a would-have-been. The future is today. Let it read.

—Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo
Pittsburghavana
January 2014

Fefita and the Berlin Wall

JORGE ALBERTO AGUIAR DÍAZ

Back then I was seeing Fefita, a fifty-year-old black woman with saggy tits and an armored ass. I was JAAD, the visitor, dragging my feet, ideas, and all the paper with the scribbles of my porn novel.

Fefita would always wait for me on the patio, and we were happy together. After we'd finish screwing, I would talk to her about literature. She had never read a book in her life. They all seemed so boring, she said, too fine and fake.

Fefita would put the coffee on and make lunch. I'd sit there and watch her ass bounce to the beat of my words about words.

I'd fill her head with characters, plot twists, and JAAD's adventures, which always sounded sad and unlikely, even if they were true.

Fefita would crack up at my nasty tales about Bukowski, Lino Novás Calvo, Henry Miller, and Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, a journalist who in those days had tried to write a few piss-poor stories, and showed up at my house one day so I could fix them.

For a while I helped her run a black-market toothpaste operation. One of the neighborhood guys would swipe the stuff from the factory and she would peddle it down at the train station. That's how we'd score a few pesos.

We all accepted that we had to steal. Steal to eat. The government had transformed us into a gang of criminals, and we thought we were heroes if we had four pesos in our pockets. We'd sell discount perfume, powdered milk, cans of Russian meat and anything else that came our way.

Every now and then I'd pump Fefita's ass full of my milk. I like to see my milk all over just about any woman's big fat ass. But if she's black it's even better. She loved it too, so much she'd beg for it. Over and over. Until I'd dry up, and then she'd say:

"You relax, *papito*. I'll go fix you a little steak."

Then half an hour later she'd want my long hard bone again. You bet I was hung long and hard. And I had strength to boot. And I moved like an American blender. Then the years started to catch up with me. My prick shriveled up and started to hang like a dish rag. Now I can hardly move.

But that's another story. Back then I was poor and happy. And there was Fefita with her tight black ass. Sucking my cock like you wouldn't believe.

"Put it here, *papi*, in my little mouth. Give your old woman her bottle. Spoil me, *papi*."

People had to put up with our scandals day and night.

“Can it, perverts!”

“Cradle robber! Have some pride, old hag!”

“How can you like those dirty little white boys, Fefita? Old swine!”

I had just turned twenty-four and ran as ragged as they came. Holes in my shoes. Old clothes. Lice. I worked nights as a custodian and days washing floors in a building on Calle Reina. As the weeks passed I got skinny carrying around that big portfolio where I kept my porn manuscript.

“Let people talk, *papito*. You’re going to be a famous writer one day. You’re going to have all kinds of women and I’m going to be your love and we’re going to have so much fun with all your little white girls.”

“That’s right, Fefita. We’ll find a delicious white girl and live the three of us together. We’ll make it out of this dump.”

Fefita’s room was a hovel. Holes in the walls, light through the cracks in the ceiling, a brightly-lit kitchen and no bathroom. We pissed and shat in a plastic tub.

When we wanted to wash ourselves, we had to use a filthy shared room, which we usually had to wait for out on the patio.

Fefita had lost her eighteen-year-old son to the sea. Every once in a while she’d show me her only picture of him. His father left in

1980, the same year as the Mariel boatlift, “and the son of a bitch never even bothered to write.” Fefita would think back and cry.

I’d often show up when she wasn’t expecting me. She’d be slumped on her half-rotten bench, sweating from the heat and weepy, having lost the will to cook or live.

“It was a crazy thing to do. But it was right,” she would say, staring at the picture. “There’s no future for young people in this country.”

“There’s not even a country, Fefita. We’re a mistake.”

We’d go out for a walk around the neighborhood. I’d try to cheer her up.

“Come on girl, you just have to keep on living. Remember what Virgilio Piñera said: *They may be killing me but I’m still having fun.*”

She would laugh. She’d flash me her big old tits. And she’d move her big old ass. Then she’d say if she ever met the pansy who said that, it would be the end of his queering around.

And sometimes she’d go out with me. And other times I couldn’t even drag her to the corner. She’d curl up on our mattress, which was filthy with fluids and misery, and wait for death.

“That’s no way to be, sweetie.”

“We’re already dead, *papito*, and we have to keep waiting for death to come.”

The people out on the patio would fight. They'd listen to music. They'd play dominoes, talk about baseball. And there we were, just Fefita and me, at the end of the universe, naked and spent.

Whenever we emerged from her little dump, everyone would stare. All the white guys would spit and the black guys would look at me askance. The women would sing some dumb song, mutter some double entendre. But Fefita and I would just keep strutting down Gloria, Corrales, Apodaca, all the way to Egido, kissing and petting like newlyweds. That's how we liked to lighten things up.

"Let's go down to the port, *papito*."

She liked the smell of petroleum. We watched the boats. I told her to close her eyes and imagine a bay full of seagulls. I stopped at the sea wall and opened my arms and shouted:

"If I hadn't thought the water was encroaching like a cancer
I could have surrendered peacefully to sleep.
I have grown used to the stink of the port,
Country of mine, so young and not yet defined!
Eternal misery is the act of remembrance,
Town of mine, so young and not organized!
Life in the basin with the scum of rage,
No one can leave! No one can leave!
Light kills a village just like the plague,
And what good is the sun in such a sad place?"

She got all nervous and told me to shut up.

"For your mother's sake, *papito*, here comes a cop."

And then she remembered what I had said about Virgilio Piñera. She began to fuss and flutter.

“I’m scared. I’m so scared,” she said.

The cop looked us up and down as if we were a pair of lunatics and crossed the street. And we were a pair of lunatics.

When we didn’t have the money for rum we’d make some sugar water and go down to the station. We’d find a spot where we could sit and watch the trains. We looked like a couple of kids watching those locomotives whistle. The station cafeteria sold stale, fly-covered bread with pasta for one peseta. And that’s what we’d eat. Then she’d talk about El Verraco, the little town in Santiago de Cuba where she was born.

“One of these days I’m going to get on one of those trains and go. Havana’s nothing but a big loony bin now.”

And it was. Havana was flooded with lunatics and beggars, prostitutes and policemen. When we heard the news that communism had fallen in the Soviet Union, everyone poured into the streets to wait.

Then the little food we had disappeared. Everyone was famished. We were walking cadavers, our faces contorted into grimaces of death. And horror. Groups of two or three undercover cops appeared on every corner in case anyone started to mouth off about the government.

Fefita and I would wake up hopeful and go to bed even more hopeful.

“It’s going to fall here any day now, Fefita.”

And we’d fuck on empty stomachs. Then one day even the bread with pasta disappeared from the station. People with money had nothing left to buy. Most of the time we’d just eat rice. Fefita would save the leftovers and we’d eat them for breakfast the next morning with water. Sugar was a luxury.

“It doesn’t matter, Fefita. It’s going to fall any day now. Then you can go off to your town and I’ll write whatever I can milk out of my dick.”

Fidel appeared on TV. Stern, haggard, he had aged in just a few weeks: “We’ll sink the island first. Socialism or death,” he said, closing his speech.

He looked desperate, and I had the feeling these hours would be his last in power.

I got the news through my father. He had a short-wave radio and we would listen to Radio Martí. The communist countries fell one by one. When Czechoslovakia fell I thought of Milan Kundera. Fefita thought of her son.

“See? He goes and drowns and now look. This guy is going to fall and I don’t even have my son.”

And the days went. And our hope went. And I didn’t write one more line of my porn novel.

One weekend I didn’t go over to Fefita’s place. I was sick. I didn’t even have the strength to walk to Jesús María. Three days in bed

drinking soup that was just hot water and listening to the news. Sick in body and mind. Sick with history. Sick with fear.

People were waiting for something big to happen, they began to speak of freedom. And we didn't know when the town would fill the streets and come undone like wild beasts. They had trained us to be obedient dogs with our tails between our legs. But we were rabid dogs who had been abandoned by our master.

I woke up on Monday feeling better. I walked over to Fefita's and ran into a *mulato* who lived around there.

"Hey white boy, where the fuck do you live?" he asked.

"What's your problem, bro? What do you care?"

"Don't play tough, white boy. I'm asking because Fefita left us, and nobody knew where you lived to go and tell you."

"What do you mean Fefita left...?"

"Yeah, *compadre*. She's gone. Heart attack."

I went to her room. It had been taped off by the Urban Reform Office. Her neighbors told me everything. Someone gave me water and coffee. I stayed late hanging around the patio.

She had died Saturday afternoon. They buried her that same day since she didn't have any relatives. She died in bed. An old lady handed me my portfolio of papers and said:

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