

I. Time

'Dura Como Merengue en la Puerta de la Escuela'

The clock has little relevance in Havana. Even newspaper weather reports carry no forecast, just today's conditions. Timepieces are superfluous and lateness a vague concept: you'll still be seated as Giselle fingers the royal hem mid-act; you can step into Tai Chi class during the sixth movement; and though the coffee may have grown cold, a demitasse of the sweet, black nectar forever awaits you. Here, whole weeks and months fall between the cracks of comfortable yesterdays and uncertain tomorrows; even years can slip by unnoticed, like a stealthy teenager tiptoeing in past curfew.

Hurry up and wait, hurry up and wait, hurry up and wait and wait and wait: the city paces itself at a parabolic tempo that's like the hurricane watch, with everyone anticipating the hit and then weathering the blow, gathering themselves up and moving on. Beholden to such meteorological maybes and other uncertainties - brothers disappearing to Miami or Madrid, perfidious lovers and periodic light failures - Cubans are conditioned to live in the moment. Who knows if the bus will come? If it comes, will it stop? If it stops, will there be room for more passengers? If it stops and there's room, will I be lucky enough to squeeze on? In Havana, living means waiting and we might as well tell some jokes, throw back some rum and drink in the sensuous scenery of the meantime – whether we're waiting for a bus or something *más allá*.

This city, this system, demands superhuman discipline and tolerance, which is shot to hell once the moment of truth arrives – as the box office opens or when the bus finally pulls to the curb, the doors unfolding with a screech. Then everyone breaks into a run or at the very least a

trot and the race is on. “¡Dale! ¡Dale! ¡Corre! ¡Corre!” The staccato commands to ‘step on it!’ bounce from the granite stairwells of Vedado to the greasy, hot alleys of Chinatown. If you don’t laugh here, you’ll cry and if you don’t hustle when it counts you’ll languish, molder, miss out or be stranded. Timid Cubans, I imagine, must suffer especially.

The more months I pass here, the more I realize that Havana time is not only a parabola, it's also a helix, doubling back upon itself, causing motion sickness, confusion and in the end, entropy. Cubans maintain their balance by living for right now: eating fast, fucking faster and devouring the latest gossip as a nearby phone rings itself hoarse. Appetizers, ice cream, carnal moments, secrets and other juicy goods here ‘*dura como merengue en la puerta de la escuela*’ (last as long as candy at the school door) and tough luck if you don’t run and get yours.

One of the most common misconceptions about Havana, so common it's assumed, is that there’s no transport. Though I would be lying if I said the buses were efficient, dependable or accommodating, they do run, albeit to a rhythm that can be learned but never mastered. The art and battle of getting on the bus teeters on the pornographic - always physical, occasionally sensual, and sometimes violent, intolerable and obscene, when pleas of *tranquilo, tranquilo* fall on deaf ears. The bus rolls up and you rush the entrance, pushing through and forward and on. The door just barely closes, mashing the last contorted body against the rest. Once inside, it’s asses against thighs and hips touching wrists, skin on skin and beads of sweat dripping between breasts. Catching the wizened eye of an aging Cubana, skin as dark and shiny smooth as a plum, she shrugs an eyebrow that says: ‘it is what it is.’

Shuffling back towards the rear, farther than the crush of the crowd should allow, *campesinos* squeeze from their seats so new mothers can sit. Young men with gold teeth and Yankee caps hold the packages of strangers left standing, lessening their burden just a little, just

for now. Meanwhile the aisle fills with murmured *gracias* and shouts of *¡permiso!* and *¡paciencia!* Maneuvering towards the back door, hands grab hands, shoulders, waists, whatever steadying hold as the bus lurches; the pleas of *permiso* turn to cries of *¡perdón, ay, perdón!* And at last the bus is slowing, you're nearing your stop, dipping your head to window height to time your arrival.

Suddenly the stop appears. Passengers are tumbling out the back door, gasping for sweet fresh air laced with diesel and burning garbage. Laughing men hang about the door to cup the elbows of disembarking females, ushering them down and off. '*¡Dale, dale! ¡Corre, corre!*' a woman implores her son, running with his small hand clasped in her sure one. '*No es fácil,*' she thinks, adjusting the kerchief-covering-curlers that will transform her from working mom to smoldering beauty once dusk bleeds to night. If only they catch their next bus in time.

Order is maintained through conditioning, discipline and good nature. Marvelous that life still blossoms given such close and clammy circumstances. Indeed, endurance is a social virtue embodied by most everyone remaining on the island. But to endure with a laugh, still enjoying life in spite of it all, *that* is what's so characteristically Cuban. Sometimes when tolerance has run its course, however, solidarity crumbles and eyes flash dangerously, turning sour whatever patience to this point sustained smiles. Without missing a step in the complex salsa-son beat, however, Cubans are instantly back to laughing and joking, as if sustaining rancor was too much trouble.

We ran to catch the 100 Bus home, though it was already overflowing with Cuban summer: girls in bikini tops flashing cocoa butter skin; gap-toothed men with sweet, creased faces like raisins; and handsome housewives but for the unsightly moustaches fringing their upper lip. Somehow we boarded the bus, smashing ourselves against the multitude returning from the beach. My husband pressed hard against me from behind, so no stranger could do likewise. I smelled moonshine mixing with sea salt and sweat and heard laughter drifting through tiny gaps left by backpacks and bones crushed awkwardly against seats.

I tried not to stare at the massive cleavage a squat matron pushed against my ribcage as we rolled to a stop. The familiar chorus of *¡permiso, permiso, me quedo!* erupted throughout the bus. Rearranging so many bodies so quickly, in such a confined space, is a matter of practice and form that takes a measure of jostling and touching that's invasive to me, the native New Yorker. As bags shifted and bodies contorted, the usual murmurs and pleas grew louder. Now they were high pitched yells. The rearranging turned unexpectedly furious, and people were pushing and shouting. We watched from the back of the bus as a line of drunk women looking older than they should thanks to birthing and rum, emerged from the hot mass in front of us: first just a head poked through, then a shoulder, a couple of arms, followed by a leg, then another and finally the first body, then a second and a third broke free. How did they cleave their way through that wall of humanity packed thick from front door to back? Surely persistence and practice are key in maneuvering towards the exit, but this defied spatial relations. I was relieved to already be close to the back door, near where the drunken ladies were now exiting down the stairs and off the bus. Suddenly there was more pushing from behind and the multitude surged towards us. The remaining friends in the group were trying to disembark and the shouting grew fiercer, meaner, with yells of *¡pinga!* and other invective mixing with mild expletives like *¡coño!*

and ¡carajo! My husband pressed against me protectively, the matron's flesh grew hotter against mine, and one last inebriated compañera pushed through the crowded aisle and off the bus. She was followed by the last in the group, a man with a mean look in his rum-rimmed eyes who shook with anger, sweat trailing down his reddened forehead as he navigated the steps. His friends tried to calm him, catching him by the arm momentarily, but he attacked the bus window from the sidewalk, screaming a blur of Cuban curses I didn't catch. The man reached dramatically toward his waistband. I tucked my head under my arm on instinct, waiting for the gunshots. Suddenly there was an explosion of screams all around me. I raised my head. The guy had his shorts around his ankles, arms spread wide and was waving his flaccid penis around in Havana's forgiving, fading light. '*¡Esa dura como merengue en la puerta de la escuela!*' someone cried. The bus pulled from the curb trailing gales of laughter.
