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Excerpts from fiction and non-fiction

“The Island Recovered”¹

I am twice yours: in my goodbye and in my return
-- César Vallejo

Number 23 finally managed to get Gelsomina from under her bed. To change the bed sheets that were all wet, Number 23 had already taken out her best sheets, those that were pure white and still retained a faint fragrance of wind, sun, and violets. Patiently, she started covering the bed, making sure that the edges of the sheets were firmly held under the mattress, spreading the cloth evenly, sliding the palms of her hands over and over again over the surface to iron out the wrinkles, so not one fold would disturb the smooth surface of immaculate whiteness.

Carefully, she put the pillow inside the pillowcase. Then she started molding the pillow with short strokes, leveling the bumps and holes. When she finally placed it on top of the bed, Number 23 was satisfied with her accomplishment. She told Gelsomina, “Now you can lie down and rest.” Gelsomina had been attentive to all her movements, but she did not recognize her bed. With her hair still moist, Gelsomina crouched, looked under the bed, trying to sit on the floor that was still wet with scattered puddles of water. With great patience, Number 23 managed to dissuade her. Gelsomina started to undo the bed with the same care that it had been made. Softly, as if she were handling a very delicate object, she took out the pillowcase, folded it twice, and handed it to Number 23. Gelsomina had not even finished pulling away the bed sheet and then folding it when Number 23 put the pillow back inside the pillow case. Number 23 made the bed, and Gelsomina undid it. Number 23 ironed out the wrinkles of the sheet while Gelsomina pulled on the other side, trying to snatch it away from the bed, until finally, after several sustained efforts, she gave up and went to bed. It was very hard for her to recognize this space as her own. Even though the bed was cozy, with fresh sheets, she thought of it as foreign. Gelsomina would check under her pillow, would move the pillow, would pound the mattress, would smell the sheets, and would stick out her head to look under her bed, the place where she really wanted to be. Little by little she became calmer and calmer. Then Number 23 handed her a magazine that was wet in some parts, but still retained a clear impression of the text.

The possibility of returning to the native land after a long absence during which a person has built a new emotional and cultural world to compensate for the loss is a difficult and painful dilemma. The new identity codes, which with time have turned into another island where one dwells, may seem indispensable to a person reborn in a different space. The returning person is not the same as the one who left, nor will this person’s vision of the recovered land be the same.

Aimé Césaire never emigrated permanently from his island. He was absent only for short periods of time. For him, the return to the island brought about swift changes: from Paris with its lights and

¹ From the novel *Desde los blancos manicomios* [Inside the White Madhouse]

noises to an obscure island lost in the Caribbean. For the person who has already been uprooted and had to make an unknown space his own the choice is heart-rending. Once that space has been conquered —brilliantly, in the case of this poet from Martinique— returning is like looking back to retrace the distances already incorporated and to renounce the path that could bring new adventures. The dilemma presents itself when a person decides to leave not the native but the foreign land; when, looking at the future, he feels the horizon has been shut beforehand and the expectations of realization have been mutilated, since one's own space has acquired a negative connotation.

When Gelsomina read these words about Césaire, she thought about herself. She was absent, sick, confined inside a hospital for the mentally ill surrounded by tall white walls, and felt her return would be very hard, impossible even. Who returns is not the same person as the one who left, nor will be this person's vision of the recovered land the same, she repeated. What would be the sum of the losses she would suffer in this voyage of return that seems like a long and sinuous road that never ends? How and when would she be able to reconcile her true self with her fragmented and dissociated self, the one rejecting reconciliation? Which of the damaged areas of her being would recover and heal, and which ones would remain irreparably marked by her illness?

Now that Gelsomina had abandoned her imaginary island under the bed, she felt her strength abandoning her. She was exhausted. Maybe it would be better to suffer from amnesia, like Number 23, instead of having a memory capable of precision, which made her remember everything. She held on to the magazine tightly, as if it were a lifesaver. Lying on her bed with almost no strength left, Gelsomina realized her illness had no visible signs, deformities or swellings that would make it evident. Maybe if it were possible for her illness to express itself outwardly through her body, the signs would be alarming: her head would grow disproportionate like a hydrocephalus, so she would need a neck collar to hold it up; her eyes, which only saw things that do not exist, would rotate chaotically in their sockets in a frantic, never-ending search; her tongue, the organ of speech, would swell and slither out of her mouth like a serpent, then coil around her enormous head. Her body, weak and forced to support such immense weight, would be emaciated and miserable, almost maimed, using canes to walk. Blind and crippled, broken and propped up: that would be the physical image of dementia. But her illness lived inside her, invisible, without any outward signs. Maybe it was better this way, so she could hide the monsters dwelling inside her head, the deformity of her ideas, the pustules and sores of her thoughts. Her healing process would be imperceptible. No one would notice how her sick organs would get rid of their flaws, nor how her extremities would grow stronger once devoid of that horrible weight. The poet will reunite with the native land, and also with the most damaged and obscure part of his identity, the part that needs to surface to be cured. Césaire's poem is a ritual of purification and healing of the most lacerated areas of the body-island expanding to the archipelago, and the rest of the world. The poem rests on degraded and crumbling foundations, to reaffirm a sense of belonging. Instead of excluding them, the poet places them in the forefront, to create an image of the islands contradictory to the European view, which depicts the islands as peaceful, utopian paradise. This unrestricted acceptance, the painful search into the abyss of a sick and dissociated consciousness, will hold the key to freedom: "By a sudden and beneficent inner revolution, I now honor my repugnant ugliness".

Gelsomina read lying on her bed while Number 23 played house with her doll. She and her baby lived in a very poor house on a street that led to the sea. Every morning Number 23 would walk close to the reef, looking for hermit crabs, then sitting for a while under the sun. From the top the rocks, she could see the fishermen's boats as they cut through the sea, leaving a trail like a path you could walk on.

Once, the waves rose dangerously high and the wind blew very strong, creating whirlpools in the puddles of water. She had to go back home, but the sea followed her and penetrated the flimsy wooden walls of her house. Cross-Eye, who was very little at the time, floated out of the house inside her cradle, and Number 23 had to swim with all her strength to snatch her back from the sea. Ever since that day, Number 23 became terrified of hurricanes. She paid close attention to weather reports, and sprinkled the ground with little wire spirals for, according to her, they would scare the hurricanes away. This became one of her most persistent delusions: every week she would devote hours to create a dozen of scare-hurricanes. Even when the winds were mild, Number 23 would make a huge spiral display on the ground and run under the covers of her bed, hugging little Cross-Eye tightly against her bosom.

Cross-Eye was a very special doll. Her body was made of a plastic soda bottle covered with a woolen sock. The tip of the sock, filled with cotton balls, became the doll's head. Number 23 had crafted her long blonde hair out of yarn, and embroidered her features: a cold little nose, prominent cheek bones, and dazzlingly pink cheeks, as if all the blush of the universe had been stamped onto them. Very close to the edge of her lips she embroidered a birth mark, a task that turned out to be very hard, as she was afraid people would mistake it for a dark spot, or even a fly. It took her a long time to find the exact place where the birth mark would give the face a feminine, seductive look. Surprisingly, the doll's eyes —huge green buttons sewn to the fabric— had been symmetrically placed. No sign of cross-eye could be seen in the brilliant gaze of her wide-open eyes. Cross-Eye was sick now. Number 23 would put a wet rag on her forehead, check her temperature, call the doctor, rock her in her arms desperately. The nurse said that aspirin would not solve the problem, that she needed to take Cross-Eye to give her a shot. But Number 23 became so anxious that to calm her down the nurse finally told her that giving her one-fourth of an aspirin tablet would solve her problem. Number 23 remained calm for a long time. A few minutes later, Cross-Eye started to cry again, louder and louder, with real pain, not just seeking attention. No one in the ward heard her. Number 23 was the only one paying attention to her wailing, to her cough, which sounded like the cough of an old dog, to her wheezing. All the other patients were talking calmly. Now they were laughing because the nurse had made a mistake while handing out the pills, about to give Gelsomina two for Parkinson's. The patients were laughing and telling stories, even while Cross-Eye kept on breathing with more difficulty each time. She could no longer cry, she would only whine, and her breathing sounded like a windbag full of holes; her effort to inhale seemed to take away what little energy she had left.

Then Number 23 saw death enter the ward. Death did not come with a hoe, or with a black cloak covering her bones. She was disguised as the aunt of one of the patients, coming to bring some clean clothes. She was a tall skinny woman with a sharp elongated face, eyes that were almost black, and straight hair. Number 23 observed all her movements carefully. She knew that at any time she could find a way to approach her and ask for the baby. She would say no. Simply, no, I won't give her to you. Even so, Number 23 was becoming increasingly nervous. She knew that no one had recognized death posing as the kind, talkative aunt who seemed so interested in asking everyone about their health. No one could help her, since no one was aware of the enormous danger she was in: they couldn't envision that other dimension, in which death came to snatch her sick baby.

Death sat down in a rocking chair, rocking back and forth. She offered the patients some coffee she had brought in a flask. It was obvious that she was biding her time, looking for a chance to take away what she wanted. In a very natural manner, she took a fan out of her purse and started flapping it. Astonished, Number 23 saw how each movement of the fan formed a whirlwind that reached her bed to take away each of Cross-Eye's breaths. Whirlwind one, whirlwind two, whirlwind three. She was terrorized. She didn't know how to fight those tiny hurricanes hanging

over her head like a most horrifying nightmare. In desperation, she started looking for the scare-hurricane spirals. Whirlwind five, whirlwind six. She found the spirals on time and was able to place one on each corner of the bed, the remaining ones covering Cross-Eye's face and body. But the tiny oval funnels kept on coming –whirlwind eight, whirlwind nine, whirlwind ten— stopping on top of her bed like circling medusas floating in the air to steal her girl's breath. Whirlwind eleven, whirlwind twelve... She knew how to fight hurricanes, but she could do nothing to fight these holothurian creatures from hell that kept on coming, one by one. Whirlwind thirteen.

Finally, as Cross-Eye stopped breathing and the last circling medusa disappeared through the window, the visitor put away her fan and said a loving good bye to her niece. Number 23 didn't tell anyone that her daughter had died. She did not scream or yell murderer, or hypocritical old bitch. She did not burst into tears, nor started wailing. She held Cross-Eye tightly against her chest and said: I will be your coffin. Obediently, her body turned rigid as wood. Her arms, folded across her torso, became heavy as lead; her blood stopped moving through her legs; a cold numbness ran up her neck: she was transformed into a hard wooden box, a shroud and a tomb, baggage and island, Cross-Eye's mausoleum.

Number 23 remained motionless for many hours. No one would come to tie her up, she thought. Rather, they would have to bring an axe to cut her to pieces if they wanted to force her out of her bed.

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“She wrote post-criticism”²

Whenever she departed from a known place, after a happy stay, she was afraid of having to face a challenge, like a test posed by unknown forces. She feared the sudden uncertainty about the road ahead, where unpredictable dangers threatened the traveler always having to be on guard against unforeseen twists of fate. A lost train ticket, a damaged piece of luggage, a delayed departure, or a horrible dream--there would always be something accidental that would require all her attention from the very beginning of the trip. This fear of Surligneur-2 came from knowing that such events, spinning secretly, laid in waiting for the right moment to grab her and never let her go. So during the trip, every move, every decision could become a call to the Devil of contingencies, always waiting to for the faintest sound to show up. Surligneur-2 felt that every departure strained her forces, demanded a permanent state of guardedness that shook out the drowsiness of everyday life. On the other hand, Sweet Lily felt that traveling was like being alive. She faced every trip with euphoria, remembering songs in which stations of life, platforms of memory, trains of oblivion were mentioned. And there she went, humming her old songs with a soft melodic rhythm that had made her tour of France really pleasant.

An olive-skinned young man approached Surligneur-2 during on the Irun-Madrid line. He had an agreeable demeanor, with messy long hair and sparkling, profound black eyes. At times, the pupils stared at everything as though objects would only become visible when illuminated by his sight, just as now as he was gazing at the empty seat beside Surligneur-2. When the Arab looked at her again, he reminded her of “The Usher” in Felisberto Hernández’ short story. She was grateful to have him as company on the trip.

“Look, there’s an empty seat here. Are you going to Madrid?” Surligneur-2 asked.

“I’m going to Morocco on vacation. I’m an Arab born in France, and always travel to Morocco when I have time. Where are you from?”

“I’m Cuban. I’m coming back from a seminar at the University of Poitiers. Even though you see me reading this book in French by Alain Sicard, I really haven’t mastered the language of Paulina Bonaparte and Lenormand de Mezy, which is why I speak to you in the language of Bob Marley,” Surligneur-2 said. In the swaying motion of the train, she delicately extended her hand, holding out a green pack of “Populares” cigarettes to Nazir. Then she tried to recall the first stanzas of “How to Get to Montego Bay”³ and fragments from *The Kingdom of This World*⁴ on the linguistic map of the periphery.

“Thanks. Take one of mine. I always smoke Camels because the camel on the label is very familiar to me. It must be a reminiscence of my childhood. In Morocco we smoke a lot of hashish. It’s not illegal.”

They smoked their cigarettes in silence. Surligneur-2 remembered that hashish knows about the shadows of a beautiful night and sings and paints about it. It never sings a somber chant. It

2 From the essay collection *Ella escribía poscrítica* [She Wrote Postcriticism] (Habana, 1996/2005)

3 “Para llegar a Montego Bay,” a poem by José Lezama Lima.

4 *El reino de este mundo*, a novel by Alejo Carpentier.

celebrates a party inside the brain and arouses gallant images. It transforms the creek into a smooth ravine, and knows the sounds of the morning. This Arabic singing plant never wails, never cries, and never makes you sad. Hashish is the mysterious plant, the extraordinary poet of the earth that gives us a sweet out-of-body instant in time.⁵

Mutual solidarity linked them together as they sent off some Nordic tourists with their disconsolate alpine backpacks, looking to share their compartment. They protected the empty seats, which would allow them to lie down during at night. As soon as the train attendant passed by, asking for tickets, Nazir pulled the curtains shut, and they uttered a gracious *bonne nuit*.

Surligneur-2 was half asleep, thinking about her Bumblebee, when she felt a slight tingling in her left arm. Dozing, she could not determine if this sensation came from the inside or the outside of her arm. It surprised her that European trains could hide exuberant tropical bugs that would bite the sleeping passengers at night. Once again she felt something in her arm. When she looked, she saw the Arab's raging phallus touching her, a lascivious macho forcibly holding her arms with such strength that she could not fight against it. Surligneur-2 felt insignificant, disarmed against the brutal force that pushed her down on her seat and gagged her mouth when she screamed. But the Arab skillfully shutting down her screams, and Surligneur-2 smelled the scent of a male in heat filling the air and touching her with a breath of lechery, moistening her cheek.

The loud rickety noise of the train muffled the sounds of the struggle. During a brief instant their eyes met, and Nazir saw the look of real terror in her eyes. Surligneur-2 felt a slight hesitation on his part, and that moment allowed her to reach the door.

Now it was Nazir who was trembling, stuttering apologies for his actions. He begged her not to call the train attendant because an Arab—like a negro, or a pig in a jute sack—was thoroughly despised by the French, who would be merciless with him when he was forced out of the train at the next stop.

They smoked their cigarettes in silence, unable to look at each other. During that long quiet that precedes any important decision, Surligneur-2 remembered how the characters in Lezama's novels, when facing the challenges of their long and arduous journey towards wisdom—the *what* of Bremond, in narrative terms—recognized the value of rituals, fate, and will. Willpower is what she was going to need now, to be able to carry her heavy luggage when she returned to the island, like a laboring ant. The luggage carried the provisions for Bumblebee that would help her endure the harsh tropical summer: yucca from Lithuania and yams from Warsaw. In a desperate attempt to save her vital energy for the long journey ahead, dragging her heavy load through the infernal little trip between trains, she invoked Mr. Squabs

Sweet Lily, on the other hand, felt merely cold and drowsy. She had begun to enjoy the soft swaying of the train that awakened her corporeal memory and brought her back to the slow trains of her adolescent years, the ones she took to travel to Escambray.⁶ Then, in an extraordinary *felisbertian*⁷ recall of lost memories she rode the magical trains of her childhood, always on time. She would have to run to the Last Car to be protected against the attacks of the Indians and the Wild West outlaws. There she would find peace and shelter. And traveling through the rhythms of her infancy, in the magical alchemy that could turn the hostile carriage of postindustrial society into Cinderella's

⁵ An intertextual play with the poem "Hashish" by José Martí.

⁶ Escambray is a mountain range in the southern part of the province of Las Villas, approximately in the middle of the island.

⁷ This is a reference to author Felisberto Hernández.

pumpkin carriage, Sweet Lily wrapped herself with her Cuban-style *intifada* scarf with an assured gesture that began defeating the resistance of the Insomniac.

Surligneur-2 was lost in the different rhythms of her reasoning memory, full of quotes and book references. She remembered how María Zambrano, in “The Metaphor of the Heart,” disqualified will power. She thought about Mr. Squabs, and about Ada Teja’s criticism, and also about the need to bring air cathedrals down to earth, like Fito Páez suggested. The strong umbilical cord that tied her to the ordinary world could be called will in capital letters. She envisioned herself working with index cards in Havana while going through *The Doors of Perception*, Jim Morrison’s biography, and a scientific super-treatise about *amanita muscaria*. She thought that only through a scientific, interdisciplinary approach would she be able to explain in class some of the peculiar traits of postmodernism. Some of these traits were known to the students, but were never discussed in class, where no mention was ever made of Albert Hoffman, the famous Swedish chemist.

Seduced by the intellectual rhythms of her academic memory, Surligneur-2 did not notice that the Arab had turned off the lights when he saw Sweet Lily all wrapped up, warm, and softly singing “Lucy in the Sky” while she laid down comfortably on the long seat, reminded of her childhood bunk bed in Camaguey. Sweet Lily embarked on a journey different from the one imagined by Surligneur-2. Sweet Lily had not forgotten the laurels of the sorceresses of Apollo, the sweet wine of Aztec warriors spilled in the Aztec Flower Wars, the magical spell of the *casaliano*⁸ veil sprinkled with diamonds—voluptuous amber sparkling in golden incense burners. Neither had she forgotten the Creole adventures with the mushroom of the outsiders—could it be the *psilocibes cubensis*?—trying to give a more familiar name to *amanita muscaria*, which sounded so remote. The Cuban mushroom provokes a dark trip with flying fish: without moonlight, this species of mushroom becomes extinct.⁹ Sweet Lily thought that since the mushrooms are already here, there must be stories about them. Like the man that chewed the poison in his tobacco after dinner, or the son of the traveler from Hamburg who picked ants with tweezers and sprinkled them with acidulous water. Sweet Lily was already lost, like Focioncillo,¹⁰ among the urinals of the Louvre, identifying deer with ants from popular ballads from the Escambray region, not found in the sweet urine of adolescents, riding Daniel’s winged horse, remembering Mackandal’s lycanthropic metamorphoses—the green iguana, the nocturnal butterfly, the stray dog, the implausible gannet, all a disguise of the black rebel *cimarrón*, Franz Fanon’s African masks, then remembering the poet’s verses: the black man is sleeping, the hashish is singing, the dream is whispering celestial harmonies in his ear. The Arab is wise: he avenges the earthly injustice.¹¹ Immersed in these thoughts, Sweet Lily did not notice Nazir going through his backpack. Immediately, mistrust arose in the Insomniac and she thought to herself:

Now he is searching for the blade that will make my throat mute and my body obedient. Damned is Sweet Lily who advises me to forgive the Arabs who rape lonely women in the compartments of the Irún-Madrid trains. She is the only person capable of thinking that a lascivious Arab is made of hot sand and loving sun. She is the only one capable of interpreting the ardent thirst of Arabic eroticism as the familiar, affectionate demeanor of the natives of the island. I deserve the knife to my throat for paying attention to her when she pities the discriminated-against Arabs, when she offers them

⁸ The term refers to the poet Julián del Casal.

⁹ Reference to a poem by the Argentinean poet Macedonio Fernández.

¹⁰ Fioncillo is character in *Oppiano Licario*, a posthumous novel of Jose Lezama Lima. He is the son of Foción, a character in Lezama’s novel *Paradiso*.

¹¹ From the poem “Hashish” by José Martí.

her trust, when she believes that a man who tries to force himself upon a woman in the middle of the night does so because he has a deep emptiness inside him, a tremendous longing for love that turns violent, but most of all, when she regrets not being able to calm the nervous restlessness of his threatening phallus, erect in solitude.

Surligneur-2 remains motionless, knowing beforehand that during a trip a single erroneous decision can have nefarious consequences, above all when one has allowed the feeling of compassion towards others to surpass self-preservation. The white deities of the road will not be so benevolent: “Oh, Elegguá,¹² so distant, why have you abandoned me?” Punishment will soon arrive on these rails of steel, and I will have to offer my body in obedience as payback for my fearless compassion, but Sweet Lily, facing the inevitable, speaks up: “Why not enjoy it? Why not remember the poet’s words that say that even Don Juan’s insatiable thirst would be quenched by an Arab lover?”

Surligneur-2 courageously opened her eyes to look at the rapist Arab, as if he were a predator tormented with desire, a lascivious glare in his eyes resembling a knife’s brilliance, dominator of rebellious attempts. But at that moment she could only feel Sweet Lily’s bursting happiness, for Nazir had offered her his coat to keep her warm from the cold while softly whispering *ne pas peur*. The next day he would carry her luggage across the platform amidst the whirling crowd. He would follow his Moroccan destiny, saturated with hashish, that of a frustrated rapist. She would look for a taxi. Now she could thank Sweet Lily for her ingenuous, compassionate vision of life, which had made it possible to turn an event disturbing the peace of the railroads into a warm handshake, one that defied the world of the hygienically air-conditioned Chamartín train station.

Translated from the Spanish by María Elena Mateo Palmer

¹² Elegguá is the deity or god-owner of roads, doors, and destiny, according to the *santería* religion in Cuba.