

Untitled (Havana 2000)

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Translated by Achy Obejas

You are standing in the inky black, a black that rises at the entrance, threatening to engulf you. This could be a place to die.

You don't know this place. It is a fortress. The ground is all cobblestones, rounded by time and water even before they arrived in Havana as weights in the belly of empty ships coming from far away, soon to be bursting with sugar and other treasures taken from the colonies. Like so many things that were supposed to be transitory, the stones remained, paved the thoroughfares, gave direction.

You are here out of curiosity, or guilt, or habit, or simply because something has called you to this dark and fetid place.

You remember every story you've ever heard about this place, about the time the Spaniards conquered Cuba, about the need to defend against

Because I don't write per se for performance, I hope this experimental text will serve as way to explore the ideas and intentions at play in this particular piece of mine, along with some of the comments and feedback that I was so grateful to receive from the audience.

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Tania Bruguera. *Untitled*. VII Bienal de la Habana, 2000. Performance. Sugarcane, video, Cubans.

unseen enemies. As happens so many times, what was supposed to protect you from others has been turned against you.

This place, this settlement now turned into a tourist haven, has been the site where government after government, generation after generation, has shut off its detractors.

There's a smell, a rising fume, that you can't quite place.

In the darkness, you distinguish a sentry dressed in black at the entrance-way. The gates are open as if in invitation. Inside, to either side, there's a blur of iron bars, tiny rooms, cells. The sentry is serious but kind and, after a cursory check of your person, lets you inside.

The smell is unrecognizable, insistent.

Everything's black, as if the space inside had swallowed the light and with it all that you know, all that's recognizable. You step uneasily into the blackness. The floor is spongelike. Walking is tentative. You must do so slowly. Your feet are like a blind man's fingers. Your senses sharpen.

You are alone here, or not. You are implicated.

The more you proceed, the more you lose your sense of time. It's like a life sentence, in which time doesn't exist anymore, memories repeated over and over.

The smell intensifies, and the floor sinks under your foot; it is milled sugarcane, still fresh, still wet. Its vapors—sweet and vile—surround you. Your skin absorbs it, sucks it in.

You hear how the walls absorbed the cries of those waiting to die. The echo trapped here with you is like the ricochet of shots from a firing squad. The walls are rocks, consolidated pain, suppressed pain, all of it pain.

You are tempted to turn around, you are tempted to run out of here.

How far have you gone? How long have you been here?

The black seems infinite, then, just as you're about to give up, it dilutes, it begins to part, to make some sort of sense. You are no longer moving based solely on sound. Now you feel other presences, you sense heat.

You begin to discern a light in the distance, it's blue, it's a pinpoint. You can't tell if it's in front of you, below, or above. That light becomes your guide and your goal. As you near it, the light rises, hovers above you.

You crane your neck to look at the light. It is almost painful.

There are sounds, something brushes by, almost touching.

The light becomes images, becomes scenes: This is a man in the prime of his life; he swims, he waves, he marries, he hugs his son while wearing pajamas. This is a man as familiar to you as your own reflection: This is the view through the keyhole or lens—it doesn't matter, it's the same. (There's nothing intimate here, nothing you didn't know after all.)

This is a young and jolly Fidel unbuttoning his shirt, over and over, showing his human skin, boasting of being free from bulletproof vests.

Your neck hurts from straining to look up.

You are not alone.

You've been standing there for some forty years, or maybe five minutes.

Your pupils are wide open.

You turn to leave and you're abruptly struck by a long, whirling tunnel of light.

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From its golden dust emerge shadows, black figures that beckon. They are naked Atlases in slow motion, moving almost imperceptibly, repeating their gestures ad infinitum: One rubs his body, as if trying to rid himself of the stench of the sugarcane, the sound of skin on skin like a murmur; another pries his mouth with his fingers to free the words stuck behind his clenched teeth; a third wipes his face with his forearm; the last bows.

Your feet sink in the milled, useless and infertile sugarcane as you head back toward the greater light. (Have you always walked this way?)

As you step out of the darkness, out of the dungeon, you are faced with the splendor and reality of light just beyond your grasp.

And, at least for a moment, you are blind.