**As Cuba Changes**

Sarah Rizk

“Come on in! Nothing from China here, it’s all from Cuba!”

A man with dark and curly hair called out to us in the mid-morning heat of our first Sunday morning in Cuba, trying to persuade us to enter his shop. I assume he wanted us to buy a trinket of some sort. Maybe one of the “mystery boxes,” as the natives call them. A small wooden box with the Cuban flag on it that opens to reveal a hidden compartment, but only if you pull the box the right the way. We all laughed—of course he knew we were American.

We were in *Fusterlandia*, a neighborhood in Cuba characterized by mosaic art. Within this neighborhood is a magical enclave of an art playground. There are platforms upon platforms separated by railings shaped like silly faces that, when the sun hit, reflect the faces onto the sidewalk under my feet. From the third level I looked down to the platform below to see the depths of a pool made of mosaic tiles and paint. The red, blue, green, and yellow appeared more vibrant when placed next to each other in what must have been a haphazard juxtaposition. A mismatched assortment of colors and mosaic glass pieced together to form lopsided faces and large hearts. Galleries and shops of handmade art, purses, license plates, and leather and wooden gifts lined the perimeter. It reminded me of a place back home, “Randyland”—a palace of repurposed art in Pittsburgh’s Northside neighborhood that was otherwise ignored, now transformed into a community gathering spot. Fuster inconspicuously drove by on a lime green motorcycle, and everyone waved.

The shop owner across the street called out, “Prices so cheap, it’s almost free!”, which must have worked because, eventually, we walked in. The shops were not so much shops in the traditional American sense, but rather white tents filled with tables that provided some shade. Next to it was a cart selling fresh coconuts cracked to drink their water. This proved to be especially funny because one of the art pieces was a mosaic woman and propped up next to it was a large white bucket that said “no coconuts” in both English and Spanish. This seemed to be somewhat of an inside joke before realizing there was a coconut cart around the corner.

Everyone piled back into the white van that seated eleven of us comfortably, but I chose to sit in Adonis’s car. It was a beautiful blue color—not a navy blue or a light blue but a beautiful blue right in the middle, like the way you would hope the sky looks on a perfect beach day. The inside and the outside of the car was lined with a light blue that looked like the color of cotton candy. The seats were made of leather and were so long it felt like only my feet hung off the end. No music played and the air conditioner made a whirring noise that was reminiscent of the plane ride I had taken just 24 hours prior. He told us about where to buy fresh fruit and I observed the people driving by.

A couple was riding a bike while sharing the seat, the man in front and the woman holding him from behind. At a red light that was really more of a pause before turning green again, he somehow had enough time to get off while she moved up to be fully on the seat. When the light turned green he pushed her and ran with so much force that they even had a head start to the car we were in that seemed to randomly jolt every so often. I heard her scream joyfully and say something in Spanish that I wish I had understood.

Instead, I sat back in my seat, tuning back into the conversation that was happening inside the car and wishing it would rain again this afternoon the way it had yesterday, heavy and during golden hour. I liked the way Cuba smelled after it had rained.

\*\*\*

I hung my hand out towards the road, hoping to find a taxi. The best place to find taxis are on 23rd street, just called 23rd colloquially, but we were closer to 17th. A bus pulled up and the passengers yelled “*Vamanos!*” at us and we shook our heads. “*No gracias, no gracias*!” we said, as we tried to hurry further down the street. A few minutes later a taxi pulled up that could fit all seven of us, and after deciding on a price of 10 CUC, we jumped in without hesitating. We successfully completed our first taxi ride negotiation.

We went to *Habana Vieja*, Old Havana, and tried to find *En El Floridita*, a bar and restaurant frequented by Ernest Hemingway. After looking around and deciding that, it was a tourist spot and therefore the prices were too high, we headed back out into the streets. We wandered around looking for a restaurant that would suit everyone for a reasonable price.

The streets were crowded with tourists and Cubans alike, weaving in and out of each other seamlessly. Shop owners calling out, enticing people to enter with $1 mojitos and promises of music. The cobblestones streets were rickety under the bike taxis and you could hear the bells of them ringing, alerting people to move quickly to the side. Carts lined the streets with rows of bananas, pineapples, and mangos. The buildings they were propped up against were usually vibrant blues, pinks, and yellows, but sometimes old buildings made of stone, reminiscent of Europe.

The restaurant we chose was white, with an open roof, layered in vines and wood bars covered in silky cloth to cover our heads. I watched as a cat moved above my head, sticking its tail in and out of the restaurant. Our food appeared on our table quickly, a pleasant surprise for all of our hungry stomachs, and as the last person got their meal, it simultaneously began to pour. The waiter looked at us, calmly, and moved some tables around in the front of the restaurant where it was covered by concrete ceiling instead of cloth. He brought our meals over, balancing almost all seven of them up his arms.

We sat down and watched the rain pour from the skies into center of the restaurant, but never flooding it. Bartenders, waiters, and waitresses huddled in the back laughing, not bothered and still attentive to the restaurant goers. The band seated behind me played music, still smiling—the music making us smile.

We finished our meals, all of us dry and warm, and ducked into an old vintage bookstore across the alley. I watched the rain from the open door frame.

\*\*\*

It’s called The Lungs of Cuba—*Bosque de Habana*, a beautiful park covered in draping trees; Anita thinks they are ficus. Joyce is translating and tell us, “It could maybe be considered similar to Central Park.” As I look around I see the dark green of the moss beneath me and the shifting shades of green on the trees engulfing me, changing when the sun hits.

The gravel parking lot, packed to the brim with pink, blue, yellow, and lime green cars, serves as a back drop for a woman and her boyfriend posing for a picture; her hand placed on his chest. I notice her long, tan legs and long, blonde hair first, but then notice her carefree attitude that reminds me of a European supermodel.

The smell hits me quickly. At first, I think nothing of it, but it continues, growing more pungent and seeming more out of place in this beautiful park that is complete with a flowing stream, vines, and the large ficus trees. I find myself thinking that the stream would be nice to take a dip in, despite the overcast skies—and smell. The disarming smell follows me as I walk further into the green.

I look down as I walk and nearly step on something. Decaying carcasses. Mostly chickens.

I walked down towards the stream, being sure to step over the lonely feathers on the ground and to avoid swarms of flies that have accumulated atop them. Tucked away between the rocks by the stream, there is a head. It’s a large head; out of sight but ironically noticeable.

I assume it’s a horse (it’s too big to be a pig or a dog). The mouth extends almost all the way up the sides with large teeth that are still intact; the fur still hanging on but by a thread. There is no adjusting to the smell, it only becomes more evident. The ground is littered with chicken bones, some fresh and some old. Every other step means another bone.

It is a religion of Cuba, called Santeria, or the “Cuban-Afro Religion” as Adonis calls it, that sacrifices animals as a form of connection to the gods or spirits. It is similar to early voodoo practices. After Cuba was colonized, Christian religion became increasingly more mainstream. However, this old religion remained and is still in practice today, even through the changing culture and economy. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba lost much financial and logistical support, and, in times of crisis, people turn towards religion. Now, as tourism becomes the most abundant source of income, tourist sites need to be created. I’m left wondering if these decaying carcasses are a show for tourism or a still true expression of religion.

To our left and to our right there were two small groups practicing, though it was unclear what stage of the ritual was occurring. Someone in the group tells me that they see dice. They go deep into the forest surrounded by the beautiful greenery and it strikes me how they remain unfazed by the groups of people that have gathered.

\*\*\*

We’ve walked through a few plazas already and there’s a few more to go. It’s Monday morning in Cuba and we’re exploring Old Havana, the section of the city where political activity used to be based out of. It originally was oriented facing the sea and then as Havana developed, it built inward, facing towards the airport. Plaza de San Francisco, oriented towards the city, holds a cathedral built by Spaniards that is no longer used for religious services but instead, now houses musicians.

“The church activity began increasing after the revolution,” we’re told, “once Cuba hit harder times people began to turn towards religion.” Again, another striking example of Cuba’s turn towards religion after the fall of the Soviet Union. I’m left wondering, again, if this particular church-turned-music hall is a show for tourism and economic boost. Or if its historical and cultural significance to the Cuban people is what is of importance. Besides the cathedral there are Russian and Greek Orthodox churches; two small churches of each can be found in Havana, and a few scattered elsewhere in the country.

I find myself connected to the idea of a Greek Orthodox church out of place in this otherwise non-religious or old Catholic city. My Coptic Orthodox church in Pittsburgh acts as a religious home for those who travel from Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia. The smallness of the Greek Orthodox church next to the splendor of the cathedral resonates with me.

We walk through *Plaza Vieja*, past a group of school children playing soccer. A blonde woman in athletic gear whips out a bag of candy and is immediately swarmed. Kids in yellow, stripes, blue, floral, and red, but each wearing white, knee high soccer socks. After a few minutes their chaperone or coach, dressed in a purple soccer uniform, blows his whistle and they line up next to their partner. Each child grabs the hand of their partner naturally and walks calmly down the street. They pass under falling water, heavy like the rain, after a woman watered her plants on the patio above.

Around the next corner is the Greek Orthodox Church—small but designed with intent. The walkway leading up to the entrance is lined with short trees with extremely large leaves and it reminds me of the Coptic church we visit in California. I can already smell the incense .

The alter is short and there are not many chairs, indicating a small congregation. But everything is gold and the ceilings are high. The golden chandelier is magnificent, filled with candles, and it takes up most the room. The icons are similar to mine and they line the walls of the church and the sides of the alter. The floor is strewn with rose petals, probably leftover from Easter or a baptism. Professor Rangel tells us that the priests are Cuban, not Greek, and gives a little chuckle. I’m curious and ask if the service is spoken in Spanish or Greek—the answer is Spanish.

Along the back wall is a container of candles to light. The left side is for those who have passed and the right side is for those who are alive. I take off the blue and purple floral skirt I put on when I entered and place it on the table outside. I remember to snap a picture for my dad.

\*\*\*

Sometime after lunch, we were asked if we wanted to see the cave.

On this particular afternoon in *La Picadora*, there skies were overcast, leaving the air feeling sticky but the prospect of rain seemed encouraging. Through a small gate there was a field of a bright green grass that was slightly wet and dewy. We marched through a narrow pathway and through more fields to find the cave where they found the bones. The trees hung over the path, draping their damp leaves everywhere, and every so often a branch had to be moved out of the way so we could pass by. The hike was easy at first, mostly flat and dry, with sturdy ground to walk on. The mountain that held the cave was visible from the other side of the massive trees.

On the ground were caterpillars that curled into spirals the size of my fist; its width the size of the thumb. They were black and white striped and seemed immobile. I reached down to untangle one with a leaf and felt a stern grasp on my shoulder. “No. Dangerous.” Ale said. I took a step back and continued to walk, making a mental note to avoid them from now on (we later found out they were the source of quite a few rashes). Fences of barbed wire were abundant in the forest and we would crawl under, careful not to touch the ground below us or the wire above us like we were in the most intense game of limbo we had ever played.

Then it began to pour. The already wet landscape was now drenched as rain came down in heavy buckets and there was still lots of time left to walk. I tucked my bag under my shirt and continued up the now steeper hills. Feet in front of me was the leader, Leares, who scurried up the hills with ease. He was 18. A shorter boy, tanned, and wearing a blue shirt and darker blue shorts. His smile was soft and teasing; rambunctious but also protective. I used the fallen branches and rocks built into the path to guide me into the cave. It was completely green on the inside, just like the trees surrounding it.

“Don’t touch your eyes or your mouth,” Leares said in Spanish, “there’s bat poop.” I looked around and realized the green walls of the cave were stained with white. He walked over to the corner of the cave and dug around for a minute. He appeared excited to show us and held out his hand. “Bones,” he said. They were the human remains that encouraged the *La Picadora* community to engage in archeology. Small and white, covered in a dark red brown dirt. I looked down, out of the cave, and saw the mountain we had just climbed. I let out a sigh and felt my drenched shirt cling to my body, but the breeze coming through the opening of the cave provided relief.

We hiked back down the mountain, slipping on the freshly muddy ground and catching ourselves on the rocks and fallen branches again. The hike back was shorter and flatter. A horse with a brown body and white face and pink nose waited for us at the bottom of the hill behind a fence. As we walked back to the community leaders’ homes, there were large palm trees in the distance, black pigs that wandered with abandon, and houses of the neighbors in the community that are just as vibrant as the houses in Havana. Cars zipped by on the street, making us move to the side. We hurried along the side of the road, anxious to change out of our muddy, soaked clothes. As I moved out of the way, I got a sniff of the rain on my clothes and smiled.

\*\*\*

“You can leave here and go make changes. We can’t make changes but, generally, we are happy.”

Anita looked at Julia and me from across the table in *La Picadora* and nodded her head knowingly, adding a small eyebrow raise to punctuate her thought. We were sitting down at a white table, surrounded by hanging plants, mostly succulents, and hammocks made of a material similar to burlap. There were desserts on the table leftover from a feast of a dinner. We ate *papas fritas*, salad, corn tamales, and rice and beans. The star of the dinner was the pork from the pig roast, made behind the kitchen in a large, white oven about as tall as me.

Esther, the community leader mother, came around after we ate, picking up dirtied plates and cups with fruit juice residue. She brought the dishes back to the outdoor kitchen, square with a rickety roof, for the other women to wash, dry, and put away. Esther was a tan woman of average height, that didn’t speak much but smiled widely and often. The music the community neighbors were creating in the background was the perfect volume and people were still dancing around the tables behind us. The hustle of each person created a shared buzz, efficient and unifying.

Before dinner Esther had gathered us around the table and taught us Spanish dances as the neighbors played their instruments, mostly drums and guitars, and danced to the beat. Others sat around the tables or in hammocks drinking beers and chatting. Little girls ran around and played with the puppies under the table. Esther then put us in a line, without speaking, and showed us by example to put our hands on the shoulders of the person in front of us. We danced in a line, swaying our hips. When we danced our way over to a plank that has been propped up, Esther motions for Maya, who was standing in front of me, to get on it. When she doesn’t, I step up, unaware of what’s to come.

I turn around and see the line of everyone behind me looking up at me. I look at Esther, who has an encouraging and teasing smile, and I hula hoop my hips down as far as I can go. It was a funny feeling to laugh at my own discomfort. I stepped down to the other side, watching as the rest of the group takes their turns, clapping the whole time. We all are looking at each other and gleefully moving to the music as the night turns colder.

A man in a green and white striped shirt, with calloused hands, extended his arm to me and motioned for me to dance with him. We danced the salsa—as best we could with my clumsy feet, and he spun me around with the ease and joy of an experienced dancer. I thanked him with a smile after the song ended and sat back down, watching again. I considered the value of our interaction; genuine human connection despite language and cultural boundaries.

Every so often the power went out as we danced and ate, and I think about what Anita said to us. They have made a powerful community—sharing, living, and learning together as a way to make economic and sustainable differences in their lives, and now, it has made a difference in mine and that is the part of them that can make changes.

\*\*\*

I nicknamed him Gonzo, a name Eva had come up with when I hastily texted her with my limited WiFi about how much she would love the stray cats and dogs that roamed Havana. Julie told me she thinks its because of Hurricane Irma—it hit Cuba hard. I can only imagine the rain that Cuba must have received then, if this is how much it rains now.

I watched Gonzo, a tiny white cat with brown ears, a little brown patch over his eye (and two more on his stomach), and icy blue-silver eyes, dart up a tree in front of me. He climbed the tree easily, landing in the upper branches in a split of a second, then jumping to the tree beside it.

The trees weren’t very tall and had a skinny trunk but leaves larger than the size of my hand. They lined the patio of the Residencia and teal pillars were aligned between each one. The bright orange flowers in them made them look like orange fruit trees. I’ve asked Professor Rangel about the flowers in Cuba, and he told me a lot of them, specifically the red flower bushes that line all the streets, are imported from Indonesia and Brazil. I wonder about the bright orange ones.

Julie tells me that Ashley compared the stray dogs and cats to squirrels in America (probably all coming from Squirrel Hill). Someone in the van compared the cows and horses along the rural communities to deer. I remember the restaurant, where I—a vegetarian—sat watching the chickens roam around while chicken, *el pollo*, was prominently featured on the menu. And the two pigs that wandered the outskirts of the *La Picadora* community, seemingly out of place.

I lost sight of Gonzo to stare at the flowers, but knew I would see him again as he roams the patio of the Residencia tomorrow night—like he does every night.

\*\*\*

I was standing near the wall in King’s Bar when I heard someone next to me say, “Look, a violin!” and I was surprised at how surprised I was to see a woman in the corner of the bar playing a violin with so much vigor, matching the beat of the song playing through the speakers. A large screen played the music video of a Spanish song I didn’t know and I watched with amazement as the woman played the violin so perfectly on beat to this EDM dance song. Men and women are dancing graphically around us; people looking to find love for the night. It’s cramped and loud.

When Selena, Olivia, Elise, and I left the club, we walked about a mile down to the beach. It seemed as though everyone in Cuba was out for the night. People milling around, drinking, laughing, and calling out to the girls passing by. A man with a guitar hung to his back walked by us and gave a flirty wink so we asked him if he could play us a song. He brought us to sit down on the *male*c**ó***n* and began to play “Despacito,” a Spanish song he knew Americans would know. His hair was short curly and his shirt clung to his muscles, flexing as he played. I sat and listened to people sing along, feeling the breeze of the ocean behind me.

We clapped when he finished playing and he smiled proudly. He asked us, in Spanish, if we wanted to learn to salsa. We all looked at each other, excitement in our eyes, and nodded in agreement. I’m not a good dancer and was always told I have two left feet, but I came to Cuba for new experiences.

He brought us to his friends about 200 feet further down the road. We were greeted by a small group in the hundreds of people roaming the *male*c**ó***n* that night. One of them walked up to me, wearing a navy blue polo with red bands on the sleeves. His hair was also short and curly, but his hair was lighter and so was his skin. He greeted me with a smile and handshake, firm and gentle at the same time. He spoke English with a slight Spanish accent, but spoke calmly and clearly so I could feel every word. His questions were polite and interested—genuine, and his smile matched his attitude. I felt relieved that his hands stayed by his side until he asked me if I was ready to salsa.

“There are four main steps to salsa,” he taught me, “and the first is to move back one two and forward three four and to the side five six and spin seven eight.” He was originally from Spain, he had friends in Cuba, but was currently living in the UK. It was his last night in Havana. “No, like this,” he motioned, and told me keep my hands in his.

As we spun my dress twirled in a circle like the way it does in movies and for the brief seconds I faced the ocean I could watch the lights glisten off the water behind us. I followed his movements the best I could, thankful for someone who was willing to teach and be patient while I tried to learn.

\*\*\*

A man on the street passed out small sheets of paper encouraging us to come to an art show on Thursday night. It advertised as a 1 CUC cover charge and accompanying drinks for .50 CUC, the equivalent of a $1 cover charge and 50 cent drinks. So, on Thursday night, we made our way down the street about four blocks and walked into the basement of a bar, past people standing against the railings and chatting. No one paid any attention to us even as a large group of Americans, and we even snuck past the bouncer collecting the cover charge (until he tracked us down).

The young people were dressed differently than the rest of Havana—it was clear we had found our way to the Cuban art scene. Lots of scarves and striped shirts, hairstyles similar to those in the American hipster community, and chunky shoes. The only lights on were reds, yellows, blues, and purples that lit up as though a disco ball was turning. Small tables lined the edges of the bar, each with only a chair or two, never more than three. There’s not a piece of artwork in sight.

We went up to the bar and were informed that, no, drinks were 2 CUC, and the only ones available were rum and coke. Once discussing with small head nods with the rest of the group, we decided, without speaking, that we would have a drink and stay a while—we were already there after all. After retrieving my rum and coke from the bar, I walked into the next room and sat in the back against the wall made of rocks, watching my step in the dark basement. I was acutely aware that no one cared.

There is a large screen, the same as most of the places I’ve visited in Cuba so far, playing music videos. The music is loud and fills the room; rap and EDM music seem to be Cuban favorites. After our table of three fills up, the remaining people struggle with where to sit. A short man with a strong presence, gently touches one of us and points to a table in the back. Three go sit at that table and he brings over a few more chairs for the rest of us from a side room. His silence is striking juxtaposed with his in-charge attitude.

A tall woman sporting a ponytail and a white scarf walks up to the stage, still silent. She greets the crowd and begins to sing, while the man next to her plays his instrument. Her songs are surprisingly all in perfect English, though she speaks Spanish as fluently as a Cuban native. Everything is calm and the background on the screen reminds of the depths of a lake covered in algae. Next, the man who brought us the chairs walks up to the stage and it’s clear why he is in charge. His voice is deep and demanding. He recites original poetry in Spanish and the first line is striking— “I don’t like your face when we have sex.” He moves around the stage, his arms moving in strong circles and his legs taking long strides.

We sit for about an hour and a half, watching as the various Cuban artists recite poetry, play the guitar, and rap. No one is trying to sell anything, but the support for the people on stage is evident in their respectful silence. The rest of the performances are all in Spanish but I sit quietly and sip on my rum and coke, listening to the way the words mesh together to make beautiful art—just what the flyer described.

\*\*\*

An old dump of garbage. Now, an art sanctuary for children. It’s called *Le Tanque*, the Tank. “We work in five programs,” Michael told us, “painting, music, dancing, sculpting, filmmaking—and there are 32 of them who are special needs.” Michael was one of the few people I’ve met in Cuba who speaks fluent English and so he spoke to us to for an hour, and for once, we all understood without translations. He was kind and smiled a lot, always making sure we were comfortable. And always encouraging us to dance.

It’s reminiscent of our time in the art providence of *Matanzas*, particularly the inclusion—rather than isolation—of special needs children. I remembered us standing in a circle around a large horseshoe, a symbol of good luck to the community; the entrance to a place of change. The murals and street art had traces of political activism woven into beautiful masterpieces, bright and happy yet thought provoking and intense. It was a place of historical violence and prejudice, now turned into community determined to work towards a better future.

I remembered watching everyone out and about, working together—the urban equivalent of *La Picadora*. Workers stood in front of us, bent over on the ground. A man in tan clothes had walked by, covered in plaster, and his image stuck with me as he moved steadily down the cobblestone street. I watched a young girl, maybe 5, with red shorts and long, braided hair, bend over on the ground with three boys of the same age, playing with the gravel on the ground. The building we stood across from had been in complete ruins before the start of the project, but it was built up in a short eight months so that the community could have a place to gather.

This was all on the forefront of my mind as we started from the entrance of *Le Tanque* and moved our way through a patio-esque room covered in a sunflower mural. The red, orange, yellow, brown, and green colors swirled together as I walked around the perimeter of the room and it made the dreary day seem brighter. As we walked into the ceramics and art studio, Michael made sure to introduce us to the teachers and a handful of the students. Art work by both the students and teachers hung on the wall, breaking up the mural of the sea that had been painted on the walls. He made sure to point out that the engraving tool, a large machine the color of turquoise sea glass, worked well—but was assembled from old pieces and made by hand.

The entire area that now held this mural of a building used to be a garbage dump. The before pictures, proudly hung on the wall of the tank, show men in blue suits dragging around all sorts of garbage. The garden is filled with sculptures and plants, hanging and grounded, and a mesh net strung from the trees above, keeping it free of bugs. Michael brings us upstairs and tells us that, because many of the people in the area are poor, they do not charge to host events at the tank.

Michael calls the band out, each of them playing a different instrument—flutes, drums, and a guitar-like instrument, called a *tres*. Once again, Michael encourages us to dance. One by one we stand up in front of our seats and finally someone makes the first move onto the dance floor. I am the last one. Michael smiles when he sees everyone moving. As always I am one clunky foot next to the other, always one beat off.

A small woman, in a red and white striped shirt and gold grills on her teeth, smiles largely as she steps into the middle of the circle we have formed. Her bones are creaky and her skin is leathered but she moves with grace and tilts her head back creating space around her body. We dance. She keeps looking over at me and I try to ignore her stare, but she is insistent. I cannot stop the smile forming on my face, despite my exhaustion. She has dragged me in. I follow suit for the remaining two songs and, when the song ends, she walks over to me.

Without a word she puts her arm around me, even though she only hits a few inches above my waist, and gives a little squeeze. I hug her back tightly. I think of the others who have been encouraged by places like *Le Tanque* and *Matanzas*—Cuba has given them inclusion.

\*\*\*

“We are trying to find order in a place with no order.”

We sat back in the creaky, wooden furniture, Julia, Val, Ashley, and I, on the second floor of the Residencia, discussing the past two weeks in Cuba. Ashley’s words struck me. It was not a bad thing; it was just a different thing. People cross in the middle of the busy streets, stopping for cars to pass—instead of the other way around, stray cats and dogs run around your feet as you eat at restaurants, and it feels like music and dancing can always be found just around the corner. Colors are brighter and smells are more intense in the thick Cuban air.

I recall the tobacco farm we had visited the day before and all I can think of is the way it felt blue. Not in sadness, but in color. I think that maybe it was the outside walls. A light blue, cotton candy, the way Adonis car looks. Or one of the paintings of José Martí that hung on the wall in the Residencia.

Two women behind a table had quietly, but again warmly, handed us small cups of coffee—strong and sweet, with a full body. My best guess is with notes of cherry and I wonder if that makes sense, given the climate. As they pour, they first ask us if we want rum in it, holding up a bottle of Havana Club white rum. But, when they quickly put it back under the table, I hear someone wonder out loud if it’s because we are too young. There was a small courtyard in the middle of the house, and it reminds me of blue again. The small garden right in the center of the ground contains only mint. Everything smells like fresh mint and coffee, a familiar smell to me from the mornings my mom would drink her coffee on the back patio, next to our garden.

There is order here, I think, but maybe I’m not the one to speak on it. I am simply an observer, who has been welcomed by the people of Cuba—always warmly and rarely with any hesitation. Even when I struggled here, I never felt lost in the differences between Cuba and home, but instead found comfort in the kind of order that only Cuba has. It will always rain, there will always be music, and you will always find inclusion.