Fall 2005

Drought in Havana, 1998

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*Mujer negra* from the sea bluffs of Baracoa, Odalia dreads drought, freak of nature, she says, ill-born like a two-headed calf, a mute horse, a dwarf child abandoned among the jutías and iguanas, but even if Odalia’s cowries auger torrents, or she proffers goat’s blood to *orishas*, El Niño brings drought every generation—1998’s the worst in sixty years when fields of marrow desiccate to dust chaff, mud burr, and little survives besides African *names*, white-fleshed, Odalia grates for mealy flour, unleavened bread that petrifies overnight.

Days the tanker trucks make their rounds, whistled yells of *aguafresca* race through ruinous streets, and Odalia teeters down ramshackle stairs to join lines that crawl until sundown, then plods home on shoes soled with cardboard and hemp, cans hoisted on a shoulder pole,

a squat, jowly woman who pulled oxcarts of cane at seventeen, carved a cow’s carcass *con machete*—her street one of many where tenements crumble to sugar lumps, and black migrants from Oriente crowd into plywood lofts to raise pigs in bathtubs, distill from peels and rinds, *chispátrén*, train sparks.

Odalia drinks enough to survive, the rest saved for gods that crave okra, cilantro, seedlings of *guaguasis*, and the pygmy banana whose pungent fruit delights Oshún, *orisha* of the river, all sweet waters, who sleeps inside a clay jar she used to fill with rain and river stones, Our Lady who dances to drums of *batá*. 
Habana, still showerless into late August, tankers idle for weeks, no fuel, no parts, neither scuds nor cloudbursts to revive Oshún's guineo bush, Odalia foraging mangoes that go rancid at the altar, her last pesos spent on maduros to make amends, the last gold squeezed from bitter oranges.

Under a kapok tree, Cementerio Colón, she divines from knucklebones until Ifá commands her to hurl Our Lady's statue into the sea, bury the votive candles, burn the altar to cinders, remake Oshún from living skin. Odalia and her neighbors pool the $30 for a goat they slaughter at sunrise, the hide tanned in blood, varnished with honey, sinew stitched, an iron nail burning rainbeads around Oshún's neck, lightning bolts her belly, then chorused prayers for lluvia tropical, so profligate in sweltering days of caña de azúcar y tabaco, aguaceros that strafe zinc roofs, snap decrepit trees, so relentless they soften limestone to cartilage.