

Fall 2005

Drought in Havana, 1998

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Orlando Richardo Menes

Drought in Havana, 1998

Mujer negra from the sea bluffs of Baracoa,
Odalía 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 Odalía'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 *ñames*,
white-fleshed, Odalía grates for mealy flour,
unleavened bread that petrifies overnight.

Days the tanker trucks make their rounds,
whistled yells of *agua fresca* race through ruinous
streets, and Odalía 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, *chispatrén*, train sparks.

Odalía drinks enough to survive, the rest saved
for gods that crave okra, cilantro, seedlings of *guaguasi*,
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,
Odalía 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. Odalía 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.