

Raul Palma

THE WORLD TO COME

Olivia is my five-year-old daughter. She speaks “this language.” In her eyes, any utterance that isn’t “this one” is Spanish. When my friend told her, in Pashto, that she was such a sweet child, Olivia responded, “Hello! I don’t speak Spanish. I only speak the *normal* language.” Before she was born, I thought of the father I would be. I wanted to teach her to love, not just Spanish, but all languages—to be fascinated with how the body can produce sounds from deep within itself, and how this act of breathing and restricting airflow can be a way of unlocking the mysteries hidden inside her, a way of speaking with her elders and ancestors. There I was, in front of my friend, having raised a child who insisted in speaking only “the normal” language. I felt like I’d failed.

I was raised by Cubans in an English-speaking household; my parents spoke Spanish when they needed to speak with authority, with phrases like *eso no se toca*; *tranquilízate*, *Dios mío*; *come la comida*; *calla te*; *recoge el cuarto*. When I became a parent, I only used Spanish for disciplinary purposes. For a while, I didn’t know I was emulating them. How I have tried to make Spanish exciting for my daughter. Some days, I propped her on the kitchen counter while making dinner out of the share I picked up from the farm, and I spoke to her entirely in Spanish. It was a game. I tried to make her laugh with words like *zanahoria*, *cuchillo*, *cocinero*. This was fun in short bursts, but Spanish oppressed Olivia. What was I to do with a child who had already associated Spanish with punishment? So I stopped forcing this game onto her. I’m convinced that when she is ready, and if I am patient, an opportunity will arise to change our relationship to that language.

Recently, Olivia found me working on the computer; she asked, “What are you looking at, Daddy?” It was Cuba digitized on Google Maps. She sat on my lap: “Cuba. What’s Cuba?” Honestly, I didn’t know how to answer. I still don’t. I told her that Cuba is where her grandparents are from, where her great-grandparents are from. “I visited Cuba the previous summer. Remember? I came back so skinny and dark.” I told her that in Cuba a lot of people speak Spanish. “I’m not from Cuba,” I said. “But I have the Spanish language inside me. You have Spanish inside you too.” It felt like a good moment, initiating this conversation with her, a Latina with light hair, a light complexion. I want her to

know that she is a descendant of Cubans and Afro-Cubans. I thought this was a good start. Evidently, it wasn't.

"No!" she yelled. "I don't want Spanish inside me." She insisted, gripping her arms and pulling at her skin. "I don't want it."

I pressed her close to me, stroked her back. I wanted to say, *But it's already there, my beautiful child. I'm sorry. Inside you there is an island; there are cities and streets. There is a man, Pedro; he is your great-grandfather, a serious man forever tending to a mango orchard. A man, who in 1966 was enslaved by Fidel Castro and sent to the sugar cane fields. Two years before your birth, he died of leukemia. It was a loud and anguishing death that spanned two years. Someone from the camps, Sierra, spoke at his funeral. He spoke of the hardship in those fields of his native soil, what it was like to be so far from family, so far from God, so tired, always in fields that had been burned for the harvest. In that hopeless place, your great-grandfather found Sierra exhausted and immobile in the charred clots; he helped Sierra; wielding a machete, and chopping the sugar cane down at its stalk, he swiftly met his own quota, only to help Sierra meet his; in the evenings, he shared meals with Sierra, nurtured that stranger to health. I didn't know this about my own grandfather. After his death, I grieved. I married and moved to Chicago, and there, on Clark Street, of all places, I saw him, blocks from the home he'd moved to when he fled Cuba with his family. I saw him in black leather boots, pointed at the toe, dark jeans, a navy blue shirt tucked in. He was staring into a storefront that could only have been made for him. He was an apparition, but so real for me. What must it be like for you, my child, to live in a world when you don't see him yet? To play in the house he spent his life working for—to grow atop the orchard he meant for you to inherit?*

Yesterday I asked my mother whether she considered Olivia to be Cuban. I was driving out of Ithaca, New York, to my daughter's forest preschool, a place where she frolics in mud, catches salamanders and snakes, builds little homes for fairies along the banks of the stream. "No," my mother said, the sound of her typing coming through the receiver. "Of course not. Your daughter is an American citizen." It felt like a prayer, as if that status alone would be enough to save her in this life. To refer, first, to her citizenship frightened me; it wasn't my initial thought. When I affiliate as Cuban, I'm often referring to a large room—one built for me by my family and community in southwest Miami, replete with cafecitos, Caja Chinas, and all that Cuba Libre fervor. It's a place that I access when it's convenient for me. This room is an illusion, a paradise

lost, reclaimed and inscribed in my very bones. It's what I write about, not because I'm particularly proud of my Cubanidad, but because it perplexes me and fascinates me: how my whole outlook on Cuba stems from the wounds of the people I love most. I am their redemption, I suppose. But I have grown so bored by the Cuban exile story, which pains me because it is at my very core. This is why I traveled to Cuba last summer—to see the island and its people with my own eyes. What I saw was an incredible void where my family had once been, and an island, a home, oppressed, yes, but flourishing there in ways that I hold dear to me.

My grandmother, Estela, who ventures to the Publix near 137th Ave. twice per week to stack up on dulces, who is beginning to lose her memory, will tell me with the utmost clarity that she bartered for flour and yeast to bake bread in Havana on the days she'd visit Robertico, my grandfather. On those days, she'd shepherd her two boys onto a bus, then a ferry, hoping she'd have a chance to see him—a political prisoner in Isla de Pino. This was a prison dubbed the panoptican, notoriously oppressive because each cell faced a solitary tower; inmates always felt like they were under the eyes of Fidel. My grandfather was at another prison before that: La Cabaña, a jail still riddled with bullets today. During my recent visit to Cuba, I didn't even realize when we passed it on a ferry into Havana. In those post-revolution days, men were lined up against the wall in droves, blindfolded, and then executed by firing squad. If they were lucky, shots were fired at the sky. I cannot imagine what it must have been like for my grandmother. She watched her eldest son mature into military age—a boy angry at the government that had imprisoned his father. She must have known that his anger would boil over because, to protect him, she sent him to live in Spain.

Afterward, she left Cuba with my father, who was then a ten-year-old boy. They were taken in by her husband's sister, Aida, and her husband, Mario. For years my grandmother lived in their home, blocks from Little Havana, brimming with people like her, all missing loved ones, dislocated, clinging onto one another as if they were adrift in the Florida straits, looking at the sky as if to say *God, when will we ever return to the people we love?* She still lives with them—except Mario recently passed away. They live in a three-bedroom house near the Dolphin Mall in the Doral. Sometimes, at family gatherings, we poke fun at my grandmother, how she can repeat her story so often. *The bread. Yes!* Some see her compulsion to repeat this tale as a sign of her weakening mind. I don't agree. She tells the story to anyone who will listen because she is always arriving at her exile. Every day she is still becoming displaced; she recounts it to

ask, *Have I arrived? Is this home?*

In some ways I agree with my mother; Olivia is not Cuban in that she was born neither in Cuba nor in Miami, nor is she being raised in a Cuban-American community. She is too young to choose her Cubanidad—to live a life faithful to her heritage—even if it is true that she cannot escape the political mechanisms that have already captured her. But these histories and more are inside her: the glowing light of a caravel on the horizon, the “packed cries . . . the shit, the moaning . . .” and everything, every damn biblical allusion Derek Walcott elucidates in “The Sea is History.” In his poem “Eloisa to Abelard,” Alexander Pope writes, “How happy is the blameless vestal’s lot! / The world forgetting, by the world forgot.” It’s a pretty quote, but it doesn’t feel truthful to me. Because Olivia, the most social person I know, has told me, tearful, “I don’t want to be lonely anymore.” My wife and I don’t understand this loneliness. I would revise: the blameless child is lonely, and she doesn’t know why; she is able to feel the ebb and flow of something weighty; she is aware of its presence, but in a position where she does not possess the knowledge or language to access it; she knows there is a vast communion enveloping her life, but it is invisible.

When she videochats with her great-grandfather, Roberto, who survived the prisons and fled to Miami at a later date, she can barely understand him. She doesn’t know that this man’s life is a messy miracle. She can hardly see him because he’s nearly ninety years old and doesn’t really know how to hold the phone. Mostly, we stare at his pale scalp, the traces of white hair, the veins. He speaks what must be gibberish to her, and she smiles. She is fascinated by him and holds him in deep reverence. As his light fades, he must feel that it grows in her, in the child that has redeemed him—the light-skinned, light-haired “American” girl who will never know his suffering. He looks to her like all can be righted, and this common outlook unsettles me. Because she’s no one’s redemption. Why put that pressure on her?

This is why when I ask my mother, “Do you think Olivia is Cuban?” what I’m really asking is: *Do you see her? She is like us. There is an island inside her. There is a longing. She was born in Chicago, the city your mother vowed never to return to. The city you were relocated to when you first arrived from Cuba. Your first snowfall, your mother thought a nearby building was burning, the whole street covered in ash—so much ash, cold, cold, a coldness blowing in from hell. She was lonely, cleaning houses, hospital rooms. Most of the Cubans she knew were in Miami, and with time, and a little luck, your family was able to move there. During Mariel,*

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your mother drove to Tampa, took a ferry to Key West, then climbed aboard a small fishing boat and returned to the island to hunt for the family who'd stayed behind. It was a dangerous voyage, one your father couldn't make because he couldn't get off work. On a crowded dock, she climbed out of the boat, into armed guards, bodies, barking dogs. She had \$3,000; she was willing to barter. The lengths she'd taken to find her family, it was a shame she'd been unsuccessful, that she'd paid guards for nothing. She returned to the US on an overcrowded boat filled with strangers; it smelled; it could have sunk. Remember? This is the woman who only learned to drive because you were pregnant with me. She was going to find her way to me no matter what. And when Olivia was born in Chicago, she paid for her own ticket. She was there in the hospital, waiting to greet her in "this language," thick, clumsy, lobbing around in her mouth: "Beautiful. You are beautiful, my nena."