

Coming Home to Writing

EXILE is often depicted as romantic, erotic, even ennobling. Ovid was banished from Rome by Emperor Augustus in the eighth century for (we surmise) writing the *Ars Amatoria*, a how-to manual for adultery—and for indulging in some indiscretion of his own, something to which he later barely alludes. (He was married three times and divorced twice before the age of thirty.) Byron exiled himself to Greece and became a mercenary in the war of independence against the Ottoman Empire, dying in 1824 at the age of thirty-six—still flamboyant, still notorious for his sexual (sometimes incestuous) escapades. Oscar Wilde, an Irishman imprisoned in England on charges of sodomy and gross indecency, was exiled to Paris in 1897. Ill and bankrupt, he struggled to endure, though he had lost his ardor for writing. Pablo Neruda, alternately shunned and embraced for his leftist politics, was exiled from Chile in 1948 and returned home in 1952. He witnessed the overthrow of Allende in 1973. As the U.S.-backed goon squad searched his home, he is said to have taunted them: “Look around—there’s only one thing of danger for you here—poetry.”

In actuality, however, exile is an intimate dislocation, even though the chain of cause and effect that leads up to it is impersonal, beyond any one individual’s grasp or reach. For me, exile has been a defining experience. Fidel Castro descended from the Sierra Maestra, symbol and agent of a counterrevolution that itself springs from a nexus of social injustice and foreign colonization, and like so many others, I lost my homeland. The trajectory of my life and the lives of my family was altered permanently. From that point forward, my primary culture and language would come to me in fragments, refracted and distilled over time—family histories told tirelessly, yellowed photographs, brittle telegrams, disembodied voices cracked open by static. I left Cuba in my mother’s arms in 1961. I was three years old. I returned thirty-eight years later, in 1999, and understood viscerally the sorrow of how nothing would alter that loss: I can never be wholly Cuban any more than I can ever be wholly *estadounidense* or “American.”

EXILE AND LITERARY CITIZENSHIP



ELIZABETH HUERGO

was born in Havana and immigrated to the United States at an early age as a political refugee. Since receiving her graduate degrees in English from Brown University, she has taught at a number of colleges and universities in Rhode Island, Maryland, and Virginia. Her first novel, *The Death of Fidel Pérez*, was published by Unbridled Books in 2013. She recently completed her second novel, *Between Ana and Ella*, a contemporary Latina version of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Romantic stereotypes aside, exile is a perpetually liminal state. It's not that a person consciously resists assimilation to one culture or another, so much as that the deepest internal webbing of the soul can only reconcile itself genuinely to the threshold between the place lost and the place gained. Writing allows me to *translate*, to carry meaning across from one cultural and linguistic space to another, making the tragic liminality of exile bearable, if only because it turns a dual focus singular.

Writing delivers me to myself, letting me sit with the strength of a tetrahedral form in the hyphenated space of the phrase "Cuban-American." I understand all that only now, after reaching what Emerson calls the "distance of years." For nearly thirty years writing was the passion that healed. Paradoxically, it was also the passion deferred. What did it take to come home to myself, to write from the threshold?

THE apostle Paul, himself an exile, writes a rather rhetorical letter to the citizens of Corinth, telling them a paradoxical and difficult story, one that easily defies credibility—a story about a man raised up to the seventh heaven. Did it really happen? Paul demurs, switching to a personal story about how he pleaded with God three times to remove the thorns that Satan had thrust into his side. Three times God refused to remove or even ameliorate his pain, insisting instead that His grace was sufficient. From this divine response Paul draws the lesson that it is his weakness that makes him strong, for without those wounds, he would have no need of God's presence in his life. Despite the fact that I am a renegade from orthodoxy of any sort, after my 1999 trip to Cuba, I couldn't help but find solace in Paul's story and to quail at the courage and tenacity it takes to pass through the wound, the source of

so much pain and doubt. How difficult to see the wound of exile as the path toward healing, and how very solitary to use writing as the single implement along that path.

Then I was given a mysterious gift, the sort you read about in Grimm's fairy tales, unsought and luminous. I came upon a woman one day in *L'habana vieja*, the oldest part of Havana. Actually, I intruded on her, walking brashly across the threshold of her home, drawn by the beauty of the mosaic tiles (still intact) that adorned the building's entrance. I crossed that threshold and realized only the facade remained: only the facade, and a grand foyer with a sweeping staircase, and an old woman, bundle of rags and bones, sitting on a second-floor landing in a rocking chair, wearing the tropical morning sky like a crown. I was mortified and lowered my head. When I looked up again, she had become the Madonna in her grotto, not as Velázquez or Michelangelo might

paint her, but as Francis Bacon might have. She stared at me, her dignity intact, unassailable. Then she gave me permission—with a glance, the way a queen might acknowledge a peasant. I named her Saturnina, after a character in an anecdote my mother always tells from her childhood.

Back in the United States, I started to write Saturnina's story, then got stuck, overwhelmed by fear. The image of Virginia Woolf's Manx cat in *A Room of One's Own* became an obsession, for what an odd story I had to tell—and did I dare tell it, as an exile and a woman? Reading Woolf again, it struck me that her insistence on piecing together a history of women's writing is less polemical than personal, an act motivated by her recognition that identity is very much rooted in time and place, in history and community, and that human will is sustained, shaped by identity, which is itself an aspect of story. In *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Cornell University

Press, 2001), the feminist philosopher Hilde Lindemann theorizes that identity comprises two narratives, self and community—the stories told by our closest community inform the story we tell about ourselves. The “master narrative” of the broader culture has the power to distort and debilitate; the master “majority” has the power to tell a hateful story about a feared or misunderstood “minority.”

I paused and looked to my left. I looked to my right. Where had Saturnina gone?

According to Lindemann, who teaches philosophy and bioethics at Michigan State University, I needed a “counter-story,” a tale told within a communal space, a space similar to the wound within which the apostle Paul situates grace. I would tell the story of Cuba despite the fact that I was standing in “the belly of the beast,” as José Martí, exiled Cuban poet and statesman, called it. I would claim, at least metaphorically, that place which

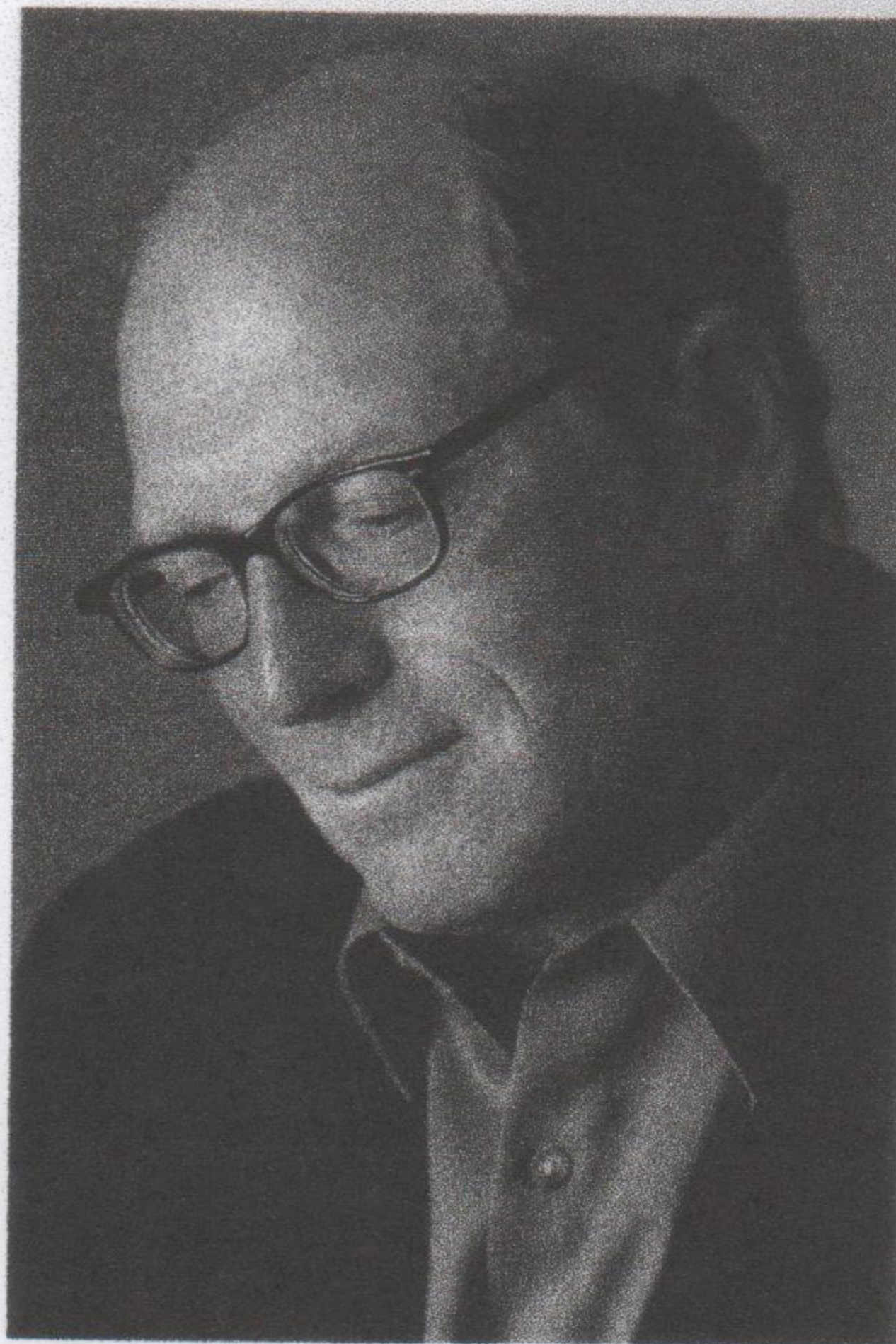
is the very ground of my being. I would tell a story about a place (Cuba) and a moment in history (the Revolution of 1959) that most people in the United States think they know, but I would tell it in a way that defied easy, debilitating stereotypes of banana republics and tin-pot dictators, the eroticized “backyard” of propaganda, of language used precisely to avoid our ability to see one another humanely and as more than a set of utilitarian “interests,” economic and military.

That's easy, I told myself. It wasn't.

THEN I was delivered a second mysterious gift. I opened my copy of Oscar Hijuelos's *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1990. Hijuelos was Cuban, the first Latino to win the prize, so I stood in line at a reading and waited to meet him. I loved the novel. And having also read his first,

Our House in the Last World (Persea, 1983), I wanted to say something very smart about how his work opened up a space where I could locate myself, how grateful I was to him for doing what I could not—writing in that hyphenated space between cultures and languages and ways of seeing. I'm sure I sounded like a deranged idiot. Nevertheless, he smiled and scribbled his encouragement on the frontispiece of my copy—such a seemingly small gesture, yet one that, like a time capsule, rolled past, present, and future into one moment. I got unstuck. Just before the publication of my debut novel, *The Death of Fidel Pérez*, I wrote to him, reminding him of his kindness, and asking if he would be willing to read my novel and write a review.

He was under no obligation, and yet he accepted the request. An extraordinary, prizewinning Cuban American writer had granted me a sense of literary citizenship. Funny, how the smallest gesture can bestow so much on another



Oscar Hijuelos

person. His kindness led me back, not full circle, but in a spiral—back toward a parallel and very different beginning, one filled with a sense of possibility, of

joy and understanding. I thanked him, and I was in the middle of writing a more reflective note of thanks to him last October, about six months after the publication of my novel, when I read the news of his sudden death at the age of sixty-two. I had just finished teaching *Everyman*, the late fifteenth-century morality play, an allegory about a man who is unexpectedly called to his Maker and discovers along his path that only Good Deeds is willing to follow him into the grave. All else is materialistic and vain; all others abandon him. I never knew Oscar Hijuelos except through his work and a moment's conversation at a book signing. His good deed toward me, his practice of good literary citizenship, helped me come home to myself and what I love and need to do.

Coming home to writing requires the kindness of strangers, a generosity that amplifies and sustains a space, and a story about possibility and belonging. ∞