Our Caribbean

A GATHERING OF LESBIAN AND GAY WRITING FROM THE ANTILLES

Edited and with an Introduction by Thomas Glave

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Sometimes our adventures did not end as we would have liked. I remember that traveling on a bus one day Tomasito La Goyesa grabbed at the fly of a very handsome young man. The young man had actually signaled Tomasito several times and had touched his own evidently erect penis. When Tomasito grabbed it, the man reacted violently, beat him up, and called him, and all of us, queers. The driver opened the door of the bus and we ran across Revolutionary Square while a crowd of "chaste" men and women followed us yelling insults. We took refuge in the National Library, through a back door, and hid in María Teresa Freyre de Andrade's office.

Tomasito's face was swollen, and Hiram Prado discovered that the wallet Tomasito was holding was someone else's. In the melee, he had grabbed the wallet thinking it was his own; it actually belonged to the man who had beaten him, an official of the Ministry of the Interior, no less. Tomasito had lost his identification card, and now it was in the hands of the aroused man who had hit him. A few hours later, the man came to the National Library in a rage, looking for Tomasito. Since Tomasito did not want to come out of his hiding place, Hiram and I talked with him. He told us to bring the wallet to his home at midnight or he would have us all arrested.

At midnight the three of us arrived at his house, trembling. The young man had been taking a shower and came out naked and drying himself with a towel, which he then wrapped around his waist. He had drawn up a long, strange affidavit for us to sign, stating that we had returned all his documents and that he had returned ours. While we read and signed the affidavit, he was touching his penis, which again was giving signs of life. At the same time, he was insulting us, calling us immoral. In questioning us, he found out that Hiram had been in the Soviet Union, and he wondered how one could be gay after having been in that country. He also said that he would do everything in his power to have us expelled from the National Library. When he found out that I was a writer, he looked at me indignantly. But his penis was still erect, and every now and then he touched it.

He finally asked us to sit down and tell him about our lives. The towel gave us ever-increasing evidence of the man's excitement. We exchanged glances among ourselves, astonished, wishing to reach out and touch the promising bulge. We left at around four in the morning; the man dismissed us with his penis still in a state of arousal under the towel. We did not dare touch that wonderful area. We feared that it might be a trap, that the house could be full of cops to catch us in the act. But this was probably not the case. The man, who was persecuting us for being gay, probably wanted nothing more than for us to grab his penis, rub it, and suck it right then. Perhaps this kind of aberration exists in all repressive systems.

I remember another adventure with a young soldier. We met in front of the UNAEC, I gave him my address; he came by and sat on my only chair. There was no need for much talk; we both knew what we were after, because at the Coppelia urinals he had already given signs of urgent desire. We tangled in a pretty memorable sexual battle. After he had ejaculated and fucked me passionately, he dressed quietly, pulled out his Department of Public Order ID, and said, "Come with me. You are under arrest for being queer." We went to the police station. All the officers there were young, like the one who had fucked me. He declared that I was gay, that I had made a grab at his dick. I told them the truth, and that I still had his semen in my body. We were accusing each other face-to-face. Perhaps he thought that by being the active partner he had not done anything wrong. Or perhaps he saw himself as having lost his virginity to a sexually deprived person. The fact is that he had enjoyed himself like a real bastard and now wanted to put me in jail. The officers were amazed at the confession; the offense was too blatant: They ended up saying it was a shame that a member of the police force would engage in such acts, because I, after all, had my weakness, but for him, being a man, there was no excuse for getting involved with a queer. I believe a record of the proceedings was drawn up and he was expelled from the police, or at least transferred to another station.

I had other such problems with army officers. Once I went into the Barreto Woods in Miramar with a soldier. We were open with each other from the beginning. He was aroused and so was I. When we found a convenient place he said, "Kneel down and touch me here," and pointed to his belly. I tried to touch his penis, which he had taken out of his pants, but he moved my hand farther up to his waist, and what I touched was a pistol. He took the pistol out and said, "I'm going to kill you, you faggot." I bolted,
heard some shots, yelled out and threw myself into the bushes. I stayed there the whole day. I heard patrol cars; the police were looking for me. Evidently the soldier, once his sexual arousal was under control, was trying to hurt me down, fortunately to no avail.

At dawn I returned to my room in Miramar. There was a terrific-looking boy waiting for me, one of my many lovers at the time who would come back again and again. He had waited for me all night. We went up to my room and between his legs I found refuge, as I had done before among the bushes when the soldier was searching for me.

My friends also had disappointments in love and with their erotic encounters. During a really dazzling carnival celebration in Havana, Tomasito La Goyesca entered one of the portable urinals set up on Prado Boulevard. Nobody went there to pee, except perhaps those who had been drinking and needed to go. They then became excited and ended up entangled with other men; there were dozens of men standing around while others sucked their cocks; some were being fucked right there. At first you could not see anything; then you could make out the bright penises and the sucking mouths. When Tomasito walked in he felt someone caressing his buttocks and his legs; he felt hands rubbing and touching him all over. Finally, completely sated and unable to bear it any longer, he went out to the street, only then realizing that someone in the bathroom had picked up shit and smeared it all over his body. It was an incredible scene to watch; a queer, full of shit from head to toe, right on Prado Boulevard, in the midst of the carnival and surrounded by thousands of people. Actually, he had no trouble making his way through the crowd; the stench coming from him was so bad that as he ran, a breach opened up to make way for him. He got to the Malecón and plunged, fully clothed, into the ocean. He swam beyond El Morro and, following him closely, I lost sight of him and feared a shark might have finished him off. He swam for hours and did not come ashore until daybreak, when he no longer smelled of shit.

Walking back to Prado Boulevard, we made up for all this. We picked up two fabulous sailors and went to the house where Tomasito lived with his mother. She was a tolerant old lady who did not mind if he came home with men, provided he did it quietly. We enjoyed those young men as much as they enjoyed us.

Pepe Malas also had numerous tragic encounters when he tried to satisfy his erotic urges. Once he was infatuated with a great example of masculine beauty who worked the night shift at the pharmacy. Pepe liked to stick his head through the small window that was left open at night, and then order ten cents' worth of aspirin while he stared at the pharmacist's fly. One night the man, tired of this game, yelled that he did not have any aspirin and yanked the window down with such force that Pepe's head got caught as if in a guillotine that had jammed at the crucial moment. People walking by on the street were somewhat astonished to see a man stuck in the little window, while the pharmacist slept peacefully on the other side.

Another one of his adventures turned out to be a little more costly. He took a hoodlum to his room on Monserrate Street, which was on the fifth floor of an old building and had a balcony above the street. The hoodlum told Pepe to take his clothes off and then pushed him onto the balcony, locking him out. The hoodlum filled a suitcase with the queen's belongings and left. Pepe, naked on the balcony above the street, did not know what to do. It would have been ridiculous to call the police; there was no way Pepe could explain how that delightful hoodlum was able to walk away with all his clothes, including the ones he had been wearing.

Hiram Prado always got into trouble in theaters. He had been sent to the Soviet Union as a young communist student, but was expelled after he was caught sucking the cock of a young Russian during a Bolshoi Theater performance.

Some time later, on one of our literary and erotic excursions to the Isle of Pines, Hiram Prado met a young man who was part of a grapefruit picking brigade. At the height of their erotic encounter, while Hiram was sucking the young man's penis behind a theater curtain, the curtain was suddenly pulled open and there they were, on center stage. The response to their performance was not exactly applause; rather, it was a deafening roar. The young man was only sixteen years old. Hiram was arrested, shaved to the scalp, and jailed. For a week I roamed the Isle of Pines trying to find out which jail he had been taken to. When I was finally about to catch the boat back to Havana, I saw Hiram and behind him the beautiful boy, who had also been arrested, being led under guard to a ship. Hiram was deported from Havana and sent to a farm in Oriente, his place of birth. We kept writing to each other for quite some time.

Once in a while our lovers had criminal intentions or mental quirks that made them commit acts of unjustified violence. The case of Amando García is a good example. He met a beautiful young judoka and took him home. The young man told him to lie down, and then he looked at Amando García and said, "You have such a beautiful neck. Stretch it out a little more." Then the beautiful Adonis ordered, "Now, close your eyes." Amando, his neck outstretched and eyes closed like a swan in ecstasy, was desperately awaiting
...the caress, when the young man gave out one of those terrifying judo yells, pounced on Amando, and with open hand struck him on the neck. The young man was actually trying to break Amando's Adam's apple and kill him. Amando, a very strong queer, screamed so loud that his neighbors at the boardinghouse came to his assistance. They took him immediately to the hospital, spitting blood. The young man had disappeared, shouting insults.

Several of Amando's erotic adventures ended in the hospital. I recall one occasion when I introduced him to one of my regulars, a recruit. I had a sort of special army; I would meet a recruit and the next day he would bring one of his friends, who in turn would bring one of his, so at times there were fifteen or twenty recruits in my room. This was too much of a surplus. And besides, we were generous and would share our lovers with our friends, who would also feel stimulated by meeting new guys. So I took this recruit to Amando. The man was really beautiful, but his penis was smaller than Amando expected. Unsatisfied, he asked the recruit to stick a baseball bat (which he kept for such purposes) up his anus. The recruit went too far and shoved almost the entire bat into Amando, causing intestinal perforation and peritonitis. For a long time he had to live with an artificial anus. (His nickname changed then from Glugi to "Double Ass").

We would also become victims of the jealousies of those buggers, as they called themselves. Sometimes they were jealous of one another. Once I got a very good-looking youth into one of the changing booths at La Concha Beach, and another guy, apparently in love with him, called the police, saying that two men were fucking in the booth. Needless to say, all homosexual acts were illegal and punishable, and to be caught in the act could mean years in jail. But that malicious guy brought the cops right to the booth where we were, naked and sweaty. They demanded we open the door; from above they had already seen us coupled. It seemed there was absolutely no escape: two naked men, inside a booth and sexually involved — there was just no way of justifying this to the police. I quickly wrapped my belongings in my shirt, making a tight little bundle, then opened the door, and before the police could lay hands on me, gave out a yell and ran at top speed down the stairs at La Concha, jumped into the ocean, and started swimming away. That day nature was my ally; suddenly there was a tropical downpour. It was almost a miracle; I saw the police looking for me in a patrol boat along the shore, but the rain was so heavy they lost sight of me. I was able to swim, naked, to Patricio Lumumba Beach, which was one or two miles from La Concha. It had stopped raining, and there were three boys jumping from the diving board. They were beautiful. In their full view I climbed up the diving board and put on my bathing suit. Then I started talking with them. I don't know if they noticed something odd about me, but they didn't ask any questions. We swam awhile, and a few minutes later they were already with me in my room, which luckily was a short walk from Patricio Lumumba Beach. They really made up for my distressing experience at La Concha. For several months I had to stop going to that beach; there were so many men wanting to fuck other men. But La Concha had been famous since the days of the Republic as a place where everybody went to fuck; you could lock yourself in those booths and do whatever you wanted. Besides, whether naked or in bathing suits, all those men were truly irresistible.

Men would go to the beach with their wives, and sit on the sand to relax; but sometimes they would go to the changing booths, have erotic adventures with other young men, and then return to their wives. I remember a particularly good-looking man playing with his son and wife in the sand. He would lie down, lift his legs, and I could see his beautiful testicles. I watched him playing with his son for a long time, lifting his legs and showing me his testicles. Finally he went to the changing booth building, took a shower, and went up to get dressed. I followed him; I think I asked him for a cigarette or a match, and he invited me in. For five minutes he was unfaithful to his wife in the most astonishing way. Later I saw him again with his wife on his arm and his son, a beautiful family picture. I think that image prompted the idea for my novel Otra vez el mar [The sea once again, published in the United States as Farewell to the Sea], because the sea really provided us with the greatest sexual excitement, that tropical sea full of extraordinary young men who swam either in the nude or in bikinis. To be by the ocean and look at the sea was always a wonderful feast; we knew that somewhere in those waves we could find ourselves, anonymous lover would be waiting.

Once in a while we made love underwater; I became an expert at this. I managed to get a face mask and flippers. It was wonderful to dive and swim underwater and be able to feast my eyes on all those bodies. Sometimes I would make love underwater with someone who also had a face mask. Occasionally he was not alone, and while he was up to his neck in the water, I would suck his penis powerfully until he ejaculated, and would then swim away with the help of my flippers. The person he was talking to at a little distance would notice no more perhaps than a deep sigh at the moment of ejaculation.

We usually had to stand in long lines to get a booth at La Concha, but if we were unsuccessful, we would perhaps make love up in the almond trees that surrounded the beach. These were luxuriant tropical trees of dense...
foliage; adolescents could easily climb them and then, up there amid the warbling of birds, we would perform erotic maneuvers worthy of professional tightrope walkers.

Our greatest joy, though, was being able to rent a house at Guanabo Beach, always a difficult proposition. Nevertheless, during the sixties one friend or another would usually manage to get one. He would not rent the house himself; it would have to be a woman or a married man. But somehow we would get a house for the weekend or, at times, for the whole week. It was a great feast. We would all bring our notebooks and write poems or chapters of our books, and would have sex with armies of young men. The erotic and the literary went hand in hand.

I could never work in pure abstinence; the body needs to feel satisfied to give free reign to the spirit. In the afternoons I would lock myself in my little room in Miramar, and sometimes write until late into the night. But during the day I roamed all the beaches, barefoot, and enjoyed unusual adventures with wonderful guys in the bushes, with ten, eleven, twelve of them sometimes; at other times with only one, who would be so extraordinary he would satisfy me as much as twelve.

Many of the guys would come back to me, but the problem was that the house was not mine; I lived in the maid's room of my aunt Agara's house. She was, moreover, an informer for State Security, and therefore it was dangerous for those young men to pay me a visit, especially if I was not home and they started pounding on the door. My aunt had many cats. I told my lovers not to enter through the front door but through the patio, and to do this they had to jump a wall on the ocean side. Unfortunately, they would sometimes land on one of my aunt's numerous cats. The cat would let out incredible howls and my aunt would scream louder. On many occasions, the youths were so terrified that they did not come to my room as we had agreed. Others were more daring and would climb in from the roof or onto the balcony on the street side. Sometimes there were four or five, and while I fucked one the others would masturbate, awaiting their turn. At times we had group sex, which was like having a party.

I would tell Lezama about my adventures. As soon as María Luisa left to prepare tea, he would ask me how I was doing and how my love life was going.² I was doing all right, although occasionally I suffered from the violence of some of my lovers, an experience shared by all of us.

I remember once, getting off the bus, I approached a muscular adolescent. We didn't waste words. One of the advantages of a pickup in Cuba was that not much talk was needed. Things were settled with a look, asking for a cigarette or saying you lived nearby and would he like to come with you. If he accepted, everything else was understood. The young man accepted, and once inside my home, surprisingly asked me to play the role of the man. Actually that gave me pleasure too, and the man went down on me. I fucked him and he enjoyed it like a convict. Then, still naked, he asked me, "And if anybody catches us here, who is the man?" He meant who fucked whom. I replied, perhaps a little cruelly, "Obviously, I am the man, since I stuck it into you." This enraged the young man, who was a judo expert, and he started to throw me against the low ceiling: thank God, he would catch me in his arms on the way down, but I was getting an awful beating. "Who? Who is the man here?" he repeated. And I, afraid to die on this one, replied, "You, because you are a judo expert."

Two blocks away from my aunt's house there was huge school called INDER.³ Thousands of young men on scholarship trained there in cycling, boxing, pole vault, and other sports. Almost all the students went through my room—sometimes a number of them, sometimes only one. Once a professor and a student met by coincidence; they looked at each other in surprise. The professor belonged to the Communist Youth Organization, and when he arrived and knocked at my door, I did not open it because I had the student in my room. He climbed on the balcony, however, pushed the window open and came in, finding his naked student there. How could he explain to that student why, at three in the morning, he was bursting into a queen's room? The truth is, I don't know how he managed it. He left that night and returned the following day when, fortunately, the student was not there.

My erotic adventures were not limited to beaches and military camps; they also occurred in universities and university dorms where hundreds of students slept. Once I met a student whose name was Fortunato Granada. He was Colombian and had come to Cuba in the hope of studying medicine. In those years the Revolutionary government had invited many young people from all over Latin America to study at Cuban universities. Once enrolled at the universities, they were subjected to political indoctrination, and finally they were told that their country had to be liberated, that it was a victim of U.S. imperialism, that they had to return home as guerrillas.

Fortunato told me all this while we were making love on a bunk mattress in the dorm basement. He wanted to be a doctor—his reason for coming to Cuba—not to go back as a guerrilla. When he refused, his passport was taken away, and now they were threatening to expel him from the university. He was trying desperately to figure out what to do in Cuba after being expelled from the university and deprived of any ID.
We continued making love for a year; he finally had to enlist as a guerrilla fighter. I don't know if he got killed, because I never heard from him again. When I wrote El palacio de las blanquisimas mojitas (The Palace of the White Skunks), I wanted to pay tribute in a small way to this great lover of mine; the hero's name in my novel is Fortunato.

The guerrillas who were lucky returned to Cuba. One of them, Alfonso, had met Fortunato. One day Alfonso knocked at my aunt's door asking for me, and he identified himself as Fortunato's friend. I realized right away what he wanted. We became good friends and excellent lovers. He had belonged to the guerrillas and now worked for the Ministry of the Interior in Cuba. He had an official role at diplomatic affairs attended by Fidel Castro, as part of his security guard. Perhaps his homosexual inclination was forgiven because he was a foreigner; or perhaps the government didn't find out about it. He kept coming to me for years. Of course, he came only now and then and, frankly, behaved in a very masculine way. Then suddenly he disappeared; maybe he was transferred to another country on a special mission. God knows where he is now.

In addition to the pickups during the day, which generally took place at the beaches, there was another powerful homosexual scene in Havana underground but very visible. There were pickups at night all over La Rampa, at Coppelia, on Prado Boulevard and along the Malecón Shore Drive, and at Coney Island in Marianao. These areas were full of recruits and students, single men who were locked up in barracks or schools and went out at night eager for sex. They were willing to settle for the first thing that came along. I always tried to be one of the first they met in these places. Hundreds of them ended up in my room. Sometimes they did not want to go that far, in which case we had to risk going downtown, to Old Havana, where we would walk up some stairway to the top floor and lower our pants. I think that in Cuba there was never more fucking going on than in those years; the decade of the sixties, which was precisely when all the new laws against homosexuals came into being, when the persecutions started and concentration camps were opened, when the sexual act became taboo while the "new man" was being proclaimed and masculinity exalted. Many of the young men who marched in Revolutionary Square applauding Fidel Castro, and many of the soldiers who marched, rifle in hand and with martial expressions, came to our rooms after the parades to cuddle up naked and show their real selves, sometimes revealing a tenderness and true enjoyment such as I have not been able to find again anywhere else in the world.

Perhaps deep down they realized they were breaking into the realm of the forbidden, the dangerous, and the damned. Perhaps that is the reason why, when that moment came, they showed such fullness, such radiance, and enjoyed every instant in the awareness that it might be their last, that it could cost them many years in jail. There was, moreover, no prostitution. It was pleasure for pleasure's sake, the craving of one body for another, the need to find fulfillment. Sexual pleasure between two men was a conspiracy, something that happened in the shadows or in plain daylight, but always forbidden; a look, a wink, a gesture, a sign, was enough to start the sequence that resulted in such full enjoyment. The adventure in itself, even if fulfillment did not come with the desired body, was already a pleasure, a mystery, a surprise. To enter a movie theater was to figure out whom we would sit next to, and whether that young man over there would stretch out his leg toward us. To reach over slowly with one hand and touch his thigh, and then to dare a little more and feel the part of his pants where that penis wanted to break through the fabric; to masturbate him right then and there during an old American movie, to see how he would ejaculate, and then leave before the movie ended; and perhaps I would never see him again, after having seen his face only in profile. What does it matter, he was surely a wonderful guy.

People would really get sexually aroused on interstate trips. If you took one of those buses crowded with young men, you could be sure that some erotic games would take place during the trip. The driver would turn off the lights, and the bus would be moving on those highways full of potholes; with each lurch of the vehicle one had the opportunity for contact, for touching an erect penis, a young thigh, a strong chest; hands could move over a body, feel for the waist, unbuckle the belt, and then, cautious and eager, reach for the spot where that terrific member lay hidden. Those adventures, and the people with whom one had them, were great. Those men enjoyed their roles of active males; they wanted to be sucked and even to fuck right on the bus.

Later, in exile, I found that sexual relations can be tedious and unrewarding. There are categories or divisions in the homosexual world. The queer gets together with the queer and everybody does everything. One sucks first, and then they reverse roles. How can that bring any satisfaction? What we are really looking for is our opposite. The beauty of our relationships then was that we met our opposites. We would find that man, that powerful recruit who wanted desperately to fuck us. We were fucked under bridges, in the bushes, everywhere, by men who wanted satisfaction while they penetrated us. Either conditions here are different, or it is just difficult to duplicate what we had there. Everything here is so regulated that groups and
societies have been created in which it is very difficult for a homosexual to find a man, that is, the real object of his desire.

I do not know what to call the young Cuban men of those days, whether homosexuals who played the male role or bisexuals. The truth is that they had girlfriends or wives, but when they came to us they enjoyed themselves thoroughly, sometimes more than with their wives, who often would refuse to suck or had inhibitions that made lovemaking less pleasurable.

I remember an extraordinary mulatto, married and with several children, who escaped his family once a week to fuck me on the iron chair in my room. I never saw a man enjoy sex so much. He was, nevertheless, an excellent father and exemplary husband.

I think that the sexual revolution in Cuba actually came about as a result of the existing sexual repression. Perhaps as a protest against the regime, homosexuality began to flourish with ever-increasing defiance. Moreover, since the dictatorship was considered evil, anything it proscribed was seen in a positive light by the nonconformists, who in the sixties were already almost the majority. I honestly believe that the concentration camps for homosexuals, and the police officers disguised as willing young men to entrap and arrest homosexuals, actually resulted in the promotion of homosexual activities.

In Cuba gays were not confined to a specific area of a club or beach. Everybody mingled and there was no division that would place the homosexual on the defensive. This has been lost in more advanced societies, where the homosexual bias had to become a sort of sexual recluse and separate himself from the supposedly nonhomosexual society, which undoubtedly also excludes him. Since such divisions did not exist in Cuba, the interesting aspect of homosexuality was that you did not have to be a homosexual to have a relationship with a man; a man could have intercourse with another man as an ordinary act. In the same way, a real gay who liked another gay could easily go out and live with him. But the gay who liked real macho men could also find one who wanted to live or be friends with him, without in any way interfering with the heterosexual life of that man. It was not the norm for one queer to go to bed with another queer; "she" would look for a man to fuck "her" who would feel as much pleasure as the homosexual being fucked.

Homosexual militancy has gained considerable rights for free-world gays. But what has been lost is the wonderful feeling of meeting heterosexual or bisexual men who would get pleasure from possessing another man and who would not, in turn, have to be possessed.

The ideal in any sexual relationship is finding one's opposite, and therefore the homosexual world is now something sinister and desolate; we almost never get what we most desire.

That world, of course, also had its dangers. Along with other homosexuals, I was robbed and blackmailed a number of times. Once, after I received my monthly pay from the National Library, just ninety pesos, which was not much but had to cover all of my expenses for the month, I was foolish enough to go straight to the beach. I met a marvelous youth who had caught a crab, tied it to a string, and was walking it on the sand as if it were his dog. I praised the crab while looking at the legs of the youth, who then quickly came with me to my booth. He was wearing a tiny bathing suit. I don't know how he did it, but during his sexual gymnastics, which he handled with practiced skill, he managed to steal all my money from my pants pocket and hide it in his small bathing suit. The truth is that after he left I realized that I had been cleaned out; I did not even have a nickel for the bus fare home. I looked for him all over La Concha Beach. In one of the open booths I found a smashed crab. He was evidently a violent person. The carapace was all that was left of the crab. The beautiful adolescent had disappeared without leaving a witness: not even a crab.

That afternoon I walked home. Once in my room, I continued writing a long poem. I entitled it "Morir en junio y con la lengua afuera" [To die in June, gasping for air]. A few days later I had to stop working on the poem, because somebody had entered my room through the window and stolen my typewriter. This was a serious theft; to me that typewriter was not only the one object of value in my possession but also the thing I treasured the most. To me, sitting down at the typewriter was, and still is, something extraordinary. I would be inspired (like a pianist) by the rhythm of those keys and they would carry me along. Paragraphs would follow one another like ocean waves, at times more intense, at others less so; sometimes like huge breakers that would engulf page after page, before the next paragraph. My typewriter was an old iron Underwood, but to me it was a magical instrument.

Guillermo Rosales, then a good-looking young writer, lent me his typewriter and I finished the poem.

Some time later a mulatto police officer, rather handsome in fact, showed up at my home. He told me: my typewriter was at the police station. The thief had been caught burglarizing another home, and his house had been searched. They found many stolen items, my typewriter among them. Apparently the thief himself told the police that the typewriter was mine: After
many bureaucratic formalities, it was returned and I had to carry it home in a bus full of people; it seemed to weigh a ton, but I got it back where it belonged. I was afraid it would be stolen again, and my friend Aurelio Corrés had the bright idea of bolting it to its metal table.

A number of times hoodlums—that is, the boys with whom I had made love—entered my room and tried to steal the typewriter, but to no effect; it was impossible to carry both typewriter and metal table. From then on I felt safer, better able to continue my love life without endangering the rhythm of my literary production. That rhythm has always been part of me, even during periods of the most intense lovemaking or of the greatest police persecution. Writing crowned or complemented all other pleasures as well as all other calamities.

There were three marvelous things that I enjoyed in the sixties: my typewriter, at which I sat as a dedicated performer would sit at his piano; the unique youth of those days, when everybody wanted to break away from official government policies and be free and make love; and lastly, the full discovery of the sea.

As a child, I had already been in the town of Gibara for several weeks with my aunt Ozaida, whose husband, Florentino, worked there as a bricklayer. I was able to get into the water then but not to experience the magic of the sea as much as I could later, at twenty-something. During the sixties I became an expert swimmer. I would swim out into the open sea in those crystal-clear waters, look back at the beach as if it were something very remote, and enjoy being rocked by the ocean waves. It was marvelous to dive in and behold the underwater world. The views are incomparable, no matter how much you have traveled and how many other undoubtedly interesting places you have seen. The island platform surrounding Cuba is a world of rock and coral, white, golden, and unique. I would come up glistening, smooth, full of vitality, toward that dazzling sun and its immense reflection in the water.

The sea was then my most extraordinary source of pleasure and discovery; to see the raging waves in winter; to sit looking at the sea; to walk from my home to the beach and there experience the sunset, the twilight. Those late afternoons by the sea are unique in Cuba, particularly in Havana, where the sun falls into the sea like a giant balloon; everything seems to change at dusk, cast under a brief and mysterious spell. There is the smell of brine, of life, of the tropics. The waves, almost reaching my feet, ebbed and left a golden reflection on the sand.

I could not live too far from the sea. Every morning when I woke up, I would go to my little balcony to look at the blue, scintillating expanse reaching to infinity, at the lavishness of that extraordinary glittering water. I could not feel despair, because no one can feel despair when facing such beauty and vitality.

Sometimes I would get up at night to look at the sea. If the night was dark, the thundering of the surf would comfort me; it was the best company that ever had, then and always. In me the sea reverberated with erotic resonance.

While sitting at Patricio Lumumba Beach one day, I watched a teenager walk toward the wall and then disappear behind it. I followed the youth; he had lowered his bathing suit and was masturbating, looking at the sea.

I was familiar with all the nooks and crannies of the seashore around Havana, the places where a sudden deepening would attract fish of unexpected colors, the areas covered with red coral, the big rocks, the huge sandbanks where one could stand to rest. After my swim I would return home and take a shower. I generally ate little and not well. Rationing was very severe, and besides, I was registered in my aunt’s rationing book. She gave me only part of my share, and usually the worst part. I once heard her say to my uncle, “Tell him the chicken was spoiled so that there would be more for us.” Chicken was available once a month and my aunt had a husband and three children, in addition to various lovers; because of that, I suffered more than others under the rigorous rationing quotas imposed by Castro. But after taking a shower or, rather, after dumping a bucketful of water over me (there was not enough pressure for the water to rise to my shower), I would go to the USAC feeling so alive that all those hours of bureaucratic work seemed bearable. I had to check galleys of horrendous publications like the USAC magazine, where I was supposed to be an editor but was actually only a proofreader, allowed to have neither an opinion nor the right to publish. But after my ocean swim I could imagine all of it was only a nightmare; real life started near the shore in the glittering sea that would be waiting for me the next day, and into which I could vanish, at least for a few hours.

Even to own a diving mask and flippers was a privilege in Cuba. I had them thanks to Olga, the French wife of a friend of mine. Those flippers and face mask were the envy of all the young men around me at that beach. Jorge Olivá trained with me many, many times, until one day he was able to swim to the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base, and freedom. La Nica, Jorge Olivá’s girlfriend, trained with my swim fins too and was also able to leave Cuba secretly, via the U.S. naval base.

One day an adolescent, a really splendid creature, asked to borrow my flippers. I saw no danger in this and gave them to him. I don’t know how he
managed to disappear the way he did; he must have come out of the water several miles from there. The fact is that I never saw that young man or my beloved swim fins again.

Hiram Prado, who was with me and knew the youth, said that we could pay him a visit. I did not hesitate and ventured with Hiram into one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Havana. It was known as Coco Solo, and was not far from Marianao. When we knocked at the young man's door he was so confused that he asked us to wait for him at the corner, where he showed up with more than twenty-five hoodlums armed with sticks and stones. We had to retreat at top speed.

All we could hope for was that Olga would bring us a new pair of flippers on her next trip to France. Olga was an incredible woman, she liked gays and found it impossible to have sex with anyone else. I assume that her life was unfulfilled, but I have met many women with such a preference. Her husband was always on the prowl for gays; they had to be passive gays who would also want to possess Olga, indeed a beautiful woman. Many heterosexuals were eager to possess her, but to no avail; she wanted to go to bed only with passive and openly gay men. Miguel asked all of us to make love to Olga and I think we all made love to his wife, out of friendly loyalty.

Miguel, however, claimed to be heterosexual, although his friends were monuments of masculine beauty. One afternoon at the beach a fierce storm broke out and Miguel and two of his friends, José Dávila and a very handsome judo expert, who I think was a member of State Security, had to take shelter in my room. Night came and they stayed over. Around midnight the judoka had an enormous erection; I had never seen a man with such a powerful penis. Miguel and José Dávila were sleeping or pretending to be asleep. The judo, who according to Miguel and José was one of the most womanizing men they had ever met, engaged me in a memorable encounter.

A few days later Miguel came to visit and could not believe it when I told him. In any case, he soon told me that he felt the need to be possessed and prodded me to do it; I had to comply. He came to my house several times with the same request, and I always obliged. After getting dressed, he would say, "I don't do it for the pleasure; I just need a prostatic massage, which is most important to maintain a healthy equilibrium."

This kind of thing happened quite often. I remember a tanned, charming young man, very masculine, who would come to my room wanting to get laid. I confess I enjoyed possessing the type of youth who appeared to be very masculine. Even if one eventually got bored, at the beginning it was an adventure. That young man, after being possessed and enjoying himself more than I did, would get dressed, give me a strong handshake, and say, "I've got to go, I have to see my girlfriend." And I really don't think he lied; he was a handsome guy and his girlfriends were lovely too.

My friends and I always liked to get together by the sea. Hiram Prado would wait for me under some pines, near the surf. Whenever we could, our group would go to Guanabo, Santa María, and Varadero Beach near the Bay of Matanzas, or to the most remote beaches in Pinar del Río. But our destination was always by the sea. The sea was like a feast and forced us to be happy, even when we did not particularly want to be. Perhaps subconsciously we loved the sea as a way to escape from the land where we were repressed; perhaps in floating on the waves we escaped our cursed insularity.

An ocean voyage, practically impossible in Cuba, was a major pleasure. Just to cross Havana Bay on the ferry to Regla was a wonderful experience.

Those times spent near the ocean inspired my novel *Otra vez al mar*. Like ocean waves, the manuscripts of this novel, which I had to write three times, kept vanishing and later landing, for various reasons, in the hands of the police. I imagine all those lost versions of my novel must be taking up a lot of shelf space in the Department of State Security in Cuba. Bureaucrats are very systematic and for that very reason, I hope my manuscripts have not been destroyed.

By the year 1969 I was already being subjected to persistent harassment by State Security, and I feared for the manuscripts I was continually producing. I packed all my manuscripts and the poems I had written earlier—that is, everything I had not been able to smuggle out of Cuba—in an empty cement bag, and visited all my friends in order to find one who could hide them for me without arousing the suspicions of State Security. It was not that easy to find someone willing to risk having those manuscripts; anyone found with them could spend years in prison.

Nelly Felipe kept them for me. For months my manuscripts were hidden in her house. One day she started to read them and was very honest with me: "I do like the novel but my husband is a lieutenant in State Security, and I don't want him to find those manuscripts at home." Again I found myself walking along Fifth Avenue with my cement bag full of scribbled papers and no place to take them.

I finally took them back home. In my room there was a small closet, which I was able to camouflage by wallpapering it just like the rest of the room with pages from foreign magazines, surreptitiously obtained. The
closet disappeared; it was now part of another wall in my room, and all those sheets of paper I had scribbled over the years were perfectly hidden.

Translated by Dolores M. Koch

NOTES

1 Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (National Union of Writers and Artists).
2 Lezama is José Lezama Lima, the renowned Cuban novelist, who was also homosexual and an important mentor of Arenas’s. María Luisa Bautista was Lezama Lima’s wife and a friend of his family.
3 Instituto Nacional de Deportes y Recreación [National Institute of Sports and Recreation] (author’s note).

RANE ARROYO

Three Poems

SATURDAY NIGHT IN SAN JUAN WITH THE RIGHT SAILORS (2004)

I’m younger than the calendar. We like this floating on bar stools, mermen amazed by our miraculous sea legs. Apocalypse has nothing to offer, upstaged as it is by this jukebox playing Shakira as if noise staves off dawn. They rub against me for I’m the shore of their shore leaves. It’s just before the heat leads to choices, and we like this competition between beers and our fate lines, the risks.

ALMOST A REVOLUTION FOR TWO IN BED (2004)

You’re still the island of the holy palm tree. What can I offer to the man married first to God and then soon to the wrong rib? Here, it’s shining outside, a spy stirred by the colors between us. The sea is never rhetorical and asks about your nakedness, that theft.

You weep because your clothes drag you back to vows. I will not comfort you, not be another goddamn mosquito net for Adam’s innocents, not shave this dawn’s whiskers of whispers. Coconuts look like balls of angels refusing perfection.