

Tropics

The vicinity of the sea has been abolished:
It is enough to know that our shoulders protect us;
that there is a huge green window
through which we may plunge for a swim.

It is not Cuba, where the sea dissolves the soul.
It is not Cuba—that never saw Gauguin,
 that never saw Picasso—
where Negroes clothed in yellow and green
roam about the dyke, between two lights,
and where the vanquished eyes
dissemble their thoughts no longer.

It is not Cuba—that never heard Stavinski
orchestrate the sounds of marimbas and guiros
at the burial of Papa Montero,
that pompous rascal with his swinging cane.

It is not Cuba—where the colonial yankee
fights the heat by sipping cracked ice
on the terraces of the houses;
 —where police disinfect
the sting of the last mosquitoes
that hum in Spanish still.

It is not Cuba—where the sea is so clear
that one may still see the wreck of the Maine,
and where a rebel leader
dyes white the afternoon air,
fanning in his rocker,
wearily smiling, the fragrance
of cocoanuts and mangoes from the customs house.

No: here the earth triumphs and commands
—it calms the sharks at its feet;
and between the cliffs, last vestiges of Atlantis,
the sponges of poisonous algae
tint the distance, where the sea hangs in the air
with a green gall-like violet.

It is enough to know that our shoulders protect us:
the city opens to the coast
only its service doors.

In the weariness of the wharves
the stevedores are no sailors:

they carry under the brim of their hats
a sun of the fields:
men color of man,
sweat makes you kin to the donkey
—and you balance your torsos
with the weight of civilian pistols

Heron Proal, hands joined and eyes lowered
carries the holy word to the people;
and the sashes of the shirt-sleeved officers
hold the overflowing of their bellies
with a sparkling row of bullets.

The shadow of birds
dances upon the ill-swept squares.
There is a noise of wings on the high towers.

The best murderer in the country,
old and hungry, tells of his prowess.
A man from Juchitlán, slave enchained
to the burden upon which he rests,
seeks and catches, with his bare foot,
the cigar which the siesta dream
had let fall from his mouth.

The captains who have seen so much
enjoy, in silence,
the mint drinks in the doorways;
and all the storms of the Canary Islands;
and Cap Vert with its motely lighthouses;
and the China ink of the Yellow Sea;
and the Red Sea glimpsed afar
—once cleft by the Jewish prophet's rod;
and the Rio Negro where float
the caravels of skulls of those elephants
that helped along the Deluge with their trunks;
and the Sulphur Sea
—where the horsemen perished, men and goods;
and that of Azogue that gives teeth of gold
to the Malayan pirate crews,
—all this is revived in the smell of sugar alcohol,
and, wearing the thin blue, three-striped caps,
they leave the captured butterflies,
while whirling clouds of smoke float up
from pipes with cherry stems.

The vicinity of the sea is abolished.

The errant yelp of brass and woodwinds
rides around in a streetcar.
it is enough to know that our shoulders protect us.

(A huge green window behind us...)
the alcohol of the sun paints with sugar
the crumbling walls of the houses.
(...through which we plunge for a swim.)

Honey of sweat akin to the donkey;
and men color of man
contrive new laws,
in the midst of the squares
where bird-shadows roam.

And I herald the attack on the volcanoes
by those who have their shoulders to the sea:
when the eaters of insects
will drive the locusts away with their feet,
—and within the silence of the capitals,
we will hear the coming of sandaled footfalls,
and the thunder of Mexican flutes.

—*Translated from the Spanish by the Marquise d'Elbée*

(Vera Cruz, 1925)