



Open Your Eyes And Soar

Cuban Women Writing Now
Edited by Mary Berg



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A World of Voices



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Luisa Campuzano

Cuban Women Writers at the End of the 90s: A Thematic/Bibliographic Map

Cuban literature, unlike the other national literatures of Latin America, was not characterized in the 1970s and 80s by an abundance of fiction written by women. However, in the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, while Cuba underwent a drastic economic contraction that had major repercussions in every sphere of life, an explosion of feminine narrative writing occurred that now, as the 21st century begins, has become one of the outstanding features of contemporary Cuban literature. The ten writers included here are among the most visible and internationally successful of a large number of women writers publishing fiction today, both on and off the island.

In the early 90s, that is, during the crisis referred to as the "special period," after Soviet economic support of Cuba ended, the economic unfeasibility of publishing magazines and long books encouraged the production of anthologies. Salvador Redonet's 1993 collection of recent stories included many women writers¹, and Nara Araujo's 1995 widely disseminated analysis of this new wave of women publishing fiction, introduced many new voices in Cuban fiction. Although many of those labeled as emerging writers did not continue to publish, and very few women writers who began writing in earlier decades remained active, some are still writing today.

By the mid 90s, this situation had changed drastically. Groups of academics, writers, artists and media experts, with or without institutional support, began to organize and put together programs and action plans, convinced of the urgent need to intervene with their various specialized cultural and professional skills in the hazardous contemporaneity of the Cuban woman, in order to foment the growth of gender awareness, to accord greater visibility to women's history and cultural achievements, and thus to reinforce the self esteem so essential in moments of crisis and uncertainty.

The most visible evidence of change occurred with the publication of Marilyn Bobes collection of short stories, *Alguien tiene que llorar* [Someone has to cry] that won the Casa de las Americas Prize in 1995, in which new topics relating to the feminine condition are described from a very different perspective and employ a new narrative syntax. Another conspicuous demonstration of change was evident in the 1996 publication of *Estatuas de sal* [Statues of Salt], a selection of which appeared in English as *Cubana* in 1998, the first anthology of Cuban women writers' stories, edited by the writers Mirta Yanez and Marilyn Bobes. This anthology provided a panoramic view of a long tradition that would provide contemporary women writers with their own legitimate genealogy, and it also included an abundant compendium of the literary production of recent decades, without excluding authors who lived and worked off the island, even if they wrote in other languages. Shortly after that, two important magazines dedicated issues to Cuban women and women's cultural production: *Temas* in 1996 and *Union* in 1997. Young women writers began to win the most prestigious national prizes: Ena Lucia Portela won the UNEAC novel prize in 1997 for her novel *Elpdjaro: pincel y tinta china*

[The bird: pen and India ink]; Adelaida Fernandez de Juan garnered the UNEAC short story prize in 1998; and Anna Lidia Vega and Mylene Fernandez Pintado received the "David" short story prize in 1997 and 1998, respectively. Since 1999, when Ena Lucia Portela was awarded the "Juan Rulfo" short story prize for *El viejo, el asesino y yo* [The old man, the assassin and I], and Karla Suarez the "Lengua de Trapo" award for her novel *Silencios* [Silences], this international recognition of Cuban women writers has meant increased publicity, more translations, and more editions of their books. In 2002, Ena Luci'a Portela was awarded the prestigious Jaen prize in Spain, for her novel *Cien boiellas en la pared* [One hundred bottles on the wall], and Nancy Alonso received the Alba de Cespedes 2002 fiction award for her collection of stories, *Cerrado por reformas* [Closed for repairs].

Any commentary on a body of work that has appeared so quickly, over such a short time span, requires an effort to establish its relationship with recent Cuban history, to reveal the strategies of its participation (in cultural practice and production) in the complex and dynamic social order of these years, in the production of transformations (and resistances) that are taking place on the island. But above all, a close reading of these texts necessitates description, albeit brief, of the dimensions of the 1990s crisis, its impact on the female half of the Cuban population, the contradictions between life conditions achieved by women during the revolutionary period, the seeming reversal of these achievements in the early 90s, and the subsequent strategies with which women have risen to this challenge. It is also necessary to recognize the rich development of culture and narrative on the island during the last decade, marked by formal experimentation and the creative appropriation of currents of contemporary thought and art, as well as by the development of more descriptive and polemical criticism. Literary and cultural magazines have played a major role in this dynamic of expansion, as they have become increasingly selective in what they publish and as they have provided greater exposure to new ideas and topics. This has meant that topics such as the textual production of our women writers and analysis of the female condition have been addressed more fully and prominently.

In a general sense, texts by women authors published in the late 90s tend to focus more or less explicitly on the different social and (especially) moral dimensions of the crisis, and its repercussions on both the public and private spheres of life. But they do not all center their interest on easily placeable referents in daily experiences in the workplace and in family life, both suddenly disrupted by the so called "special period." Instead, the difficulties of the 90s are approached laterally, with humor and irony, referred to or hinted at in texts that at first sight do not appear to discuss these topics, but on the contrary, often startle their readers with strange characters, spaces and problems that are a byproduct of the disruptions of these years. The youngest writers generally omit all reference to explicit social context and to any setting other than the most immediate context (of a person or a group) and they focus on individual voice, on self-understanding and self-exploration that are constantly interrogated and doubted. These are the designated *posnovisimas* and their writing, characterized by its powerful and conspicuous creativity, is inscribed in a transgressive and destabilizing poetics that burst into play in the novels, and story and essay collections from the 90s onward.

Almost all of these recent writers focus on topics previously either ignored or considered taboo: sexualities, eroticism, prostitution, domestic violence, pedophilia, drug

addiction. The younger writers tend to populate their fiction with bizarre characters, who navigate without clear destinations through closed and often marginal spaces. At the same time, discursive fantasy—in both "pure" and "instrumental" manifestations (in stories related to Afro-Cuban religious practices, or in science fiction, as in Gina Picart's *El druida* [The druid]) reappears in writers who had already established themselves in other approaches (Diaz Llanillo, *Cuentos antes y despues del sueilo* [Stories before and after sleep]; Liana, *Castillos de naipes* [Houses of cards]), and begins to be practiced by others (Bahr, "Tia Enma" and "Sonar", Garcia Calzada, *Historias del otro* [Stories of the other]) and even by some of the posnovisimas (Suarez, "The Eye of the Night" and "En esta casa hay un fantasma", and Vega, "Alguien entro volando").

The thematic gamut or panorama presented here is one of the possible cartographies of these recent texts. It first attempts to briefly describe the relationship of these stories to the immediate context in which they were produced, and then goes on to suggest the new paths being opened by these writers' inquiry into the feminine condition as the 21st century begins, beginning with stories that describe the hard years, the años duros of the 90s, which was a particularly severe time of crisis for women, since despite all the advances and advantages achieved by women during the preceding years, Cuban society continues to be eminently patriarchal, and this is exacerbated during a time of crisis.

Thus the scarcities, the economic cliff-hanging, and the resurgence—with money sent by relatives abroad, tourism, and the new mixed capital business ventures—of economic differences, and especially moral deterioration and the uncertainties generated by all this, are depicted realistically and emphatically (Alonso, "Thou Shalt Not Deviate," "The Seventh Thunderbolt", or are often discussed from the perspective of a particular narrator, allowing humor and irony to emphasize the paradoxes and contradictions present in a society of official equality (Bahr, "Absences" and "Little Heart;" Fernandez de Juan, "Before the Birthday Party" and "Oh Life;" Fernandez Pintado, "Mare Atlanticum;" Vega, "Peter Piper Picked a Peck" and "Russian Food").

Connected with the crisis and described by almost all of the writers either directly or tangentially, explicitly or implicitly, the topic of emigration in all its different dimensions, often constitutes a dynamic motif that interconnects texts of varied intentions. Thus, the return of some Cuban inhabitants to their countries of origin, or the eagerness of Cubans to participate in international missions or business meetings in order to travel abroad and escape the penury of the "special period" (Vega, "Peter Piper Picked a Peck;" Fernandez de Juan, "Journey to Pepe;" Fernandez Pintado, "Mare Atlanticum") serve to contrast past and present, as well as to wonder about a future that seems very uncertain, and to explore the dimensions of the moral, emotional and identity crises that characters are undergoing.

But in these stories by women there is particular emphasis on the description of the conflicts that emigration produces in those who remain behind, whether it is an old woman whose son comes to visit, laden with gifts (Vega, "Tan gris como su nombre") or a child traumatized by the departure of his mother, who makes a new life for herself in the North (Vega, "Peter Piper Picked a Pickled Pepper"). And in this dynamic contrasting of past and present, deep-rooted family conflicts are exposed and articulated as the scenarios of departure are played out: a sister who decides to stay, and a daughter who runs away in order not to leave with her mother (Bahr, "Blanco y negro") or, in a story

about a return, new reflections on what the Mariel departures were like, twenty years ago, and what people were thinking then (Alonso, "Diente por diente").

The topic of raft crossings, the *balseros*, often explored by contemporary male writers, is given a different focus in women's stories, who often describe it from a feminine point of view, as in Alonso's "The Seventh Thunderbolt" that describes the return of someone who has failed in the attempt, or Suarez' "Espuma," where the narrator is unable to deal with an unacceptable death. But the presumed clandestine departure of a husband who was molesting his daughter provides a good alibi for a mother determined to protect her child (Bahr, "Olor a limon"). On the other hand, descriptions of the mishaps and adventures of Cubans who reach the United States abound as well. Mylene Fernandez Pintado has composed an entire group of stories that display both the fascination and the repulsion that the North exercises over the individual and national imaginary, as she deconstructs the popular mythologizing of the "Yuma" (the USA) in many of her stories.

The reappearance and reconceptualization of prostitution in Cuba can be viewed as a form of emigration that does not always involve crossing national borders, but rather those new borderlines that have been established more recently, designed to protect the tourist business and foreign travelers. In "Anniversary," Karla Suarez explores this topic through the experiences and viewpoint of her narrator protagonist as she describes her perceptions of these dazzling and deceptive spaces.

Another major topic of feminine narrative in these years is the articulation of what used to be off limits—for decades, for centuries—the taboos and restrictions relating to silenced and concealed bodies. This is linked to reflection, sometimes metatextual, about writing as a space of articulated doubt and self-realization for women. In this sense, many of these texts proffer visibility both to the most violently subtle forms of "private" repression of women, as well as to the writers' strategies of rebellion against this silencing.

Victor Fowler has studied the return to Cuban writing of the 90s of a topic drastically absent in the 70s: homoeroticism, a topic reintroduced most prominently into women's narratives by Ena Lucia Portela, who has made lesbian themes one of her primary subjects of inquiry. It has become a topic featured and discussed by many other authors as well. Incest and sexual violence—long suppressed as topics of women's literature—also become powerful forces in the stories of the 1990s.

Bizarre characters of all sorts, their relationship to others, their social groups and spaces of selective marginality populate Ena Lucfa Portela's narratives, sometimes at the service of that perfidiously cultured humor she insinuates into her writing so distinctively, and sometimes at the very heart of her text, as in "At the Back of the Cemetery."

As Nara Araujo has said, the topics and conflicts traditionally labeled "feminine" have disappeared from most of these writers' texts, but in those of other young fiction writers, who display other forms and intents, there are thoughtful analyses of the uncertainties, difficulties and struggles inherent in the relationships of couples of all ages (Bahr, "Little Heart;" Fernandez Pintado, "The Anteater;" Suarez "The Eye of the Night" and many others).

Another theme that emerges in the texts by these authors, often as part of the setting, is that act of writing itself, and reflection about what it means to be a writer and inhabit a writer's world. This is an importance issue for women writers, as they have come to occupy this space of risk and freedom, of intimate exploration and personal self-fulfillment, of formal search and public projection, of the acceptance or rejection by established authorities and patrons: Bobes "Te gusta Peter Handke?"; Fernandez de Juan, "Bumerang", and many others. This is also a context in which to recall the unique 1995 book by Margarita Mateo, *Ella escribia poscritica* [She wrote postcriticism] in which essay and fiction blend to take charge and exorcize, from various cultural manifestations and the analysis of contemporary poetics and thought, not only the demons of hazardous contemporaneity in which these textualities and topics are produced or discussed, but the life setting within which and about which the author writes, omnipresent in her various personae.

Finally, many novels by women have appeared since the mid 90s, half of which (many of them with traditional historical settings) have been by longstanding writers, like Mary Cruz (Colombo de Terrarrubra, 1994; *Nina Tula*, 1998; *El que llora sangre* [He who weeps blood], 2001, Tula 2001) and Marta Rojas (*El columpio de Rey Spencer* [King Spencer's Swing], 1996; *Santa Lujuria*, 1998). Another journalist, Mercedes Santos with *El monte de Venus* [The mount of Venus] (2001), which stirred up mixed reactions in critics, has featured the topic of homoeroticism that was the subject of prominent literary expression in the 30s and 40s. Among the women publishing first novels, many have prior experience in writing for the media. Margarita Sanchez-Gallinal, in *Gloria Isla* (2001) reflects on issues in national history in the context of a family's history. In *Minimal son* (1995), Ana Luz Garcia Calzada scrutinizes family relationships and conflicts in a more specifically contemporary space, in a experimentalistic narrative based on subversive poetic strategies. Karla Suarez and, especially, Ena Lucia Portela bring some of the most important new voices to the genre of the Cuban novel. In *Silencios* [Silences] (1999) Suarez recounts, extraordinarily effectively, yet at the same time, with great economy of means, as the title suggests, the coming of age of a young woman during the last third of the 20th century. The events of her life are related within the context of her family and closest friends' conflicts with the society and the history that have affected them profoundly and that have demanded so much of them. The most internationally renowned of the contemporary Cuban women novelists, Ena Lucia Portela, in *El pajarito: pincel y tinta china* [The bird: pen and India ink] (1998) and *La sombra del caminante* [The traveler's shadow] (2001) has contributed major innovations and irresistible dramatism in the narrative continuum of her written production, surely the most condensed, ambitious and impressive body of work of this decade, in which characters intersect and move in and out, characters who for the most part belong to a small intellectual world, subterranean and sordid, in which social interactions are presented cynically and intensely, interspaced with jokes and humor that pardon no one. Her third novel, *Cien botellas en la pared* [One hundred bottles on the wall] (2002), has won an important Spanish literary prize, and will be published in Havana in 2003, as will Ana Lidia Vega Serova's first novel, *Noche de ronda* [Night watch], which appeared in Spain in 2002.

There is much more to say. There are all the Cuban women writers who live and publish in other countries: the ones who have been there for decades, and others who

have moved recently, the ones who have done all their writing there, and others who already had established careers here. And there is much more to be said about the complex interrelationships between those who live on and of the island. There is more to say, too, about the body of criticism about contemporary Cuban women writers that is growing daily. Current critics, especially those outside Cuba, discuss the work of Cuban women writers seriously and at length, though they can also be frivolous and superficial when they seek light-hearted entertainment. In this short introduction I have attempted to briefly characterize some of the recurrent themes and preoccupations in recent fiction by contemporary Cuban women writers as they write (primarily with Cuban readers in mind) about current social realities, recent transformations and upheavals, and the different human responses to these changing times.

[translated by Mary G. Berg]

Karla Suarez

The Eye of the Night

For Ode and Alfredo, for the idea

Because everything has a beginning and we almost always want to know what it is. It's an insistent need to define the causes that precede effects, and since the causes aren't always clear or perhaps we don't want to see them clearly, then we go ahead and invent them, add details, assign them one name or another, label them with dates and wrap it all into a complete package, so we can say: that's how it all began. It all began the day Jorge came home with a telescope. I've always been nocturnal. I like wandering around the house in the dark, reaching out my fingers to touch the furniture until I learn it all by heart. Jorge doesn't like this, but I've always been this way. He likes to fall asleep feeling my body next to his. I go along with this to please him, and I stretch out alongside him after we make love, staring up at the ceiling and waiting until he's fallen asleep before I get up. Night fascinates me, I don't know why he doesn't understand this.

That day he showed up at home with a telescope, he said that a friend had given it to him and that I could have fun counting stars. I liked that idea. From then on, before I went to sleep, I'd sit out on the balcony to gaze at the stars, just as he'd said. Jorge would come over, have a look through it, say something, and then a little later he'd invite me to "come to bed." "Come to bed" meant "come make love," and he'd start stripping off his clothes and get into bed naked, calling out that he was sorry he'd ever brought home that instrument, since I was neither an astrologer nor was I going to discover a new comet and if it was stars I wanted to see, he'd help me on that. That's the way Jorge is.

So my late nights changed a bit, I didn't just wander around and peer down into the street. With the telescope I could look at the constellations, I could spy on my neighborhood beyond my usual range of view. My balcony looks over an avenue that rarely has any late night traffic. Beyond that, there are houses and buildings, a park full of broken streetlights, little alleyways that get lost in the trees. I could see all of this. I turned into the busybody of the neighborhood, the eye of the night, and it was odd to think that at this very moment someone could be watching me through another telescope. We are never alone. Darkness is an accomplice with many faces.

One of those nights while I was running my eyes over those buildings, I saw him leaning on his balcony rail. A young man, smoking slowly and gazing down at the avenue as though he weren't seeing a thing, like someone who is just finishing his cigarette before he goes to bed. I'd never seen him before, so I peered at him with interest. Maybe he had the same crazy habit I did, or maybe he'd just had a bad day and couldn't get to sleep, how do I know, the eye of the night has its limits. In this case, he tossed his cigarette butt down and stayed there leaning on the railing. I kept watching him. He and I might be the only witnesses of the night; it's a good feeling to have company in an enterprise even if that venture seems totally absurd. The man lit another cigarette. At the back of his balcony there was a door, and a window with the curtains open, the room dark behind it. I couldn't make out whether there was someone inside snoring like Jorge over

on this side, and it really didn't make much difference. The man stayed there leaning on the rail for a long time, he smoked three cigarettes and, as he was tossing the last butt, he stood up, stretched his body and went into the room. Pretty boring, I thought, so I forgot all about the neighbors and stayed there watching the stars until dawn made it impossible.

The next night everything went as usual. Jorge sweating on top of me and me pumping faster and faster to hurry him along. Then the pause. A final sigh and Jorge stretched out beside me face down murmuring a faint "see you tomorrow." Then it was my time, when I could get up, look at Jorge breathing peacefully, and go out on the balcony. The neighborhood as usual, all quiet. Me spying behind my glass eye, like Corrieri in *Memories of Underdevelopment*. It's odd how you start staring at something and your head fills with all kinds of images, if I could just tape record everything that goes through my mind late at night, I'd write a novel, or a sociology book, or maybe, I don't know, you start thinking about so many things... I thought about the insomniac I'd seen the night before, his balcony was dark, he was probably sleeping like everyone else, like Jorge, who is sleeping peacefully in my bed. And why in my bed? Because that's how it is, it's been like that for a while now. First we went out occasionally, we'd see each other, he'd stay over once in a while, then more and more often, he'd leave a pair of pants here one day, a shirt another day, and somehow the house filled up with Jorge who sleeps while I think about things as I gaze at the windows over there on the other side.

At some point, I saw a light switch on in one of the windows. That was an event in these late night hours, and I had my eye focused on the apartment of the man I'd seen the night before. The window curtains were still open. If you've got something to hide, you take care to close your windows, but he didn't suspect that I was here. He came in followed by a woman, a thin woman with long hair who smiled all the time. A man and a woman in an intimate setting clearly visible to anyone who wanted to watch. If Jorge woke up he was going to accuse me of being a pervert, or he might grab the telescope away from me, you never know what crosses someone else's mind. The idea of keeping my eye on them really appealed to me, and I watched as the skinny woman undressed while he drank from a bottle he held in his hand. I've never seen a pornographic movie, so I was really intrigued by this show. She got into bed and out of my sight; he took off his shirt, lit a small lamp, and turned off the light. Off limits to snoops. The apartment turned into a very dim glow where surely a man and a woman were making love just like Jorge and I before Jorge went to sleep. Quite a while went by and I saw my neighbor get up, take another drink from the bottle, put on his shorts and come out on the balcony to smoke. Exactly like the night before, looking at the emptiness of the streets. The woman must be sleeping and he was as wide awake as I was. He smoked for a while, tossed the butt, and then lit up another cigarette, looking out over the streets just as I did in those early hours. I always wonder what other people think about when they are sitting quietly, smoking by themselves. Jorge never does things like that, we're together at night, only at night. We talk a bit, he tells me stuff, he says he's tired and bored, I listen to him. You couldn't exactly say we're in love, we're not really living together, the clothes he leaves over at my house don't at all mean that we live together. But we're here most nights, making love until he turns his back on me and falls asleep —why do we always say "making love"?-- there are other ways to say it, of course, but I don't much like them. Would I be making love with the man across the street? How do I know. The man

smoked a few cigarettes and went to bed, turned off the light and nothing else happened all night.

A week later I was more than convinced that the man across the street suffered from insomnia and that besides, he couldn't be making love, because you can't be in love with a different woman every night. His routine was a closed circle, a woman, the little bedroom light and a short while later out smoking on the balcony, like every other late night. It never varied, cigarette after cigarette that he tossed into the street while the woman slept on, like Jorge. I thought it might be interesting to go over to his house in the morning and invite him to spend the night with me. I could even show him my telescope and maybe we'd discover something. A silly idea of course, because if you choose to be out there late at night leaning on the balcony rail, it's because you want to be alone and you don't want to be confronted with evidence that someone has been spying on you. But that man puzzled me. Why that insistence on smoking and smoking silently, looking down over the street as if the street could applaud his conquests, his tired face and his lack of sleep? I don't know, men just don't cope well with being alone. He filled up his nights with women, and then what? What's the cure for a fascination with the void? You lean on the balcony rail and that's when suddenly all the truths slip out from behind their masks. Night is the great mirror. You can make a big effort to patch together the big picture with scraps, like parts of an infinite mosaic, but something happens when those subterfuges turn into buffoons making fun of us. What was Jorge doing in my bed? Besides sleeping, turning his back on me, and falling asleep after we'd sweated without loving each other, because Jorge is asleep in my bed and snoring and before he goes off to work we'll have breakfast together and then he'll come back and it's night again, another night when there I'll be gazing through the crystal eye watching how the guy across the street smokes, makes love and smokes, leans on the balcony rail and runs his hand over his face, tosses the butt into the street or rests it on the balcony rail and peers out to see if anything is going on, like I do, hoping every night that something different will happen, something different that won't be Jorge sleeping on his stomach like the women in the apartment across the way, and isn't it all the same thing? The neighbor at least changes his expression, and who knows if on one of these nights...

I began to feel obsessed. I'd slip away from Jorge's side a little sooner every night to go out on the balcony. He began to get annoyed asking what on earth I was doing in the middle of the night and complaining when I'd find some excuse to not make love. We women have some terrific excuses. Finally he'd fall asleep and I could settle myself behind the eye of the night to wait for the lamp in the apartment across the way to light up.

One night the miracle happened. My neighbor switched on the light, followed by a new woman. She came in, tossed her purse down and walked around the room looking at everything, making comments that didn't reach my ears. He went over to the bed, turned on the little lamp, and went over to switch off the main light, just as—in the very same moment—the woman turned toward the balcony. My neighbor followed her and they both leaned on the balcony railing and chatted. It was strange, that woman kept laughing and talking, he kept watching her and smiling. I assumed he must be tired of so many words and wanting, like every other night, to get to bed to then leave her sleeping and head for the balcony, but he didn't act impatient. He certainly didn't seem annoyed or detached like I'd been a few hours before, when Jorge was trying to kiss me. The man

didn't seem irritated, he kept smoking and listening to the woman, who kept smiling and then once in a while would look serious, sigh, and then start talking again. What could they be talking about? I don't know, my telescope is only a magic eye, and seeing is not like being there. All I could really conclude is that I felt really uncomfortable seeing them there talking for hours and hours, while this here-every-night man was sleeping in my bed, and once in a while he'd cough and then I'd be aware of his presence. Yes, because if Jorge didn't make a sound the entire night, then I could swear I was definitely alone, but Jorge always snored and coughed. Physically I was not alone. Physically there were two bodies in my apartment, each one occupying its space, spaces that were connected only in the interval between Jorge's "let's go to bed now" and when he fell asleep. What was he doing there every night while I was peering into the apartments across the street in the middle of the night? Peering into the apartment where the man and the woman kept on talking. Every once in a while he'd say something and run his hand over her face, smoothing her hair out of the way. He seemed like an entirely different neighbor, but it was the same man, my telescope knew him perfectly well. They kept talking. I was the spy. The telltale eye that keeps watch on plotters who are conferring in low voices, checking each other out to make sure, just a conqueror, taking over territories rightfully theirs. In the hundreds of minutes that make up the hours before the cocks crow -roosters crow a lot before dawn breaks, Jorge wouldn't know about that because he isn't an insomniac—. She straightened up, he said something and they walked toward the apartment. They stayed inside for a few minutes, someone turned off the little bedside lamp and he appeared in the doorway again, but looking different. He didn't come out and lean on the rail and smoke and look out over the street he must know by heart by now. He leaned against the door frame, gazing into the apartment, toward where I know the bed must be. I'd have liked to do the same thing. I'd have liked to give up my post, stretch my back out and gaze inside, but it wouldn't make sense. Inside, I was only going to find Jorge, lying on his stomach on one side of my bed, still hours away from waking up and wanting his breakfast. So I preferred to just stay on there to see how he stopped gazing at her and sat down on the balcony floor, across from me, leaning his head back against the wall and smiling, without smoking, without doing any of the things he and I are so used to. He stayed there like that for a bit until the woman appeared in the doorway, barefoot, with her hair loose and a sweater wrapped around her. She walked toward the man, crouched down by him and they looked at each other for a long time, I know that. It doesn't matter that her back blocked my view. Nor does it matter that I couldn't see their faces when she sat down holding out her arms and the man's hands appeared on her hair. It no longer mattered to me to see, my telescopic eye didn't matter, nor my lack of headphones that would let me overhear what perhaps they weren't going to say. He pulled her close to him and I knew they were kissing without it mattering that I was gazing at them from over here. Who was I? What effect could I have? Nothing, absolutely nothing, conclusively nothing. I was the spectator who dries her tears timidly while the projectionist rewinds the film. I wasn't anything, that's why they were kissing. He held her very close and they stayed that way, together and happy, and I felt so happy, I was surprised at my happiness watching them. She leaning against him and I seeing their faces, smiling, he kissing her ear while the woman stretched up and turned her face to kiss him and they stayed that way, so quietly, whispering things to each other, waiting for the dawn, to greet the dawn together while Jorge slept on. Jorge's such an idiot; he's

incapable of experiencing the birth of a day; he never understands anything. And I stayed there for the birth, I was there when the sky began to flood with light and the sparrows left their nests and they got up from the floor. He stretched his body and put his hands on the balcony rail to shout out something to the day that was beginning while she watched him tenderly, leaning against the wall. Then they embraced again, he put his arm around her back and they went back inside, they were lost in the shadows, they closed the curtains, pulling away from me, from my crystal eye filled with the morning light, without the dim bedside lamp. I stayed on the balcony surprised by the dawn, without accomplice stars in my eagerness to profane other's spaces, without the man and the woman, who must be lying in bed, either making love or sleeping, how do I know, sleeping probably, what does it matter, but he didn't get up again, he didn't come back to the balcony to smoke the way he did at the end of each late night. He left me alone waiting for him to appear. He left me alone the way I am. Alone. A few moments alone and now I don't need the eye of the night in order to make out the cars that are beginning to move along the street, the old men bringing their dogs out to pee, alarm clocks going off, radios blaring the morning news and Jorge rolling over in bed.

When Jorge got up, I was still outside.

"Hey, you should look for a job as a night guard, it would be perfect for you, you're so crazy... How about fixing breakfast now, come on..."

He went into the bathroom and I stayed on the balcony. A little later he came out with his pants on and the towel hanging over his shoulder.

"What are you doing still here? Hey, girl, obviously you don't have to get to work early. Breakfast ready?"

I leaned on the doorframe and watched him while he put on his shoes. "Leave, Jorge." He kept on tying his shoes.

"Of course, I'm going to work, come on, fix breakfast, hurry up now, then you can lie down and get some sleep, you've got circles under your eyes..."

"No, Jorge, leave, I want you to leave."

He looked up unwillingly.

"What's wrong, girl?"

"I want you to leave... to pack up everything and not come back...to leave."

Jorge straightened up and looked at me with a slight smile.

"What's wrong? The stars going to your head, or what?"

I didn't say anything, he sighed, stood up and walked toward me with his arms open.

"Hey now, what's wrong with my astrologer? Are you really tired?"

I stepped away from his body.

"I'm tired of you and, besides, I'm not an astrologer."

He stopped and stared at me, annoyed.

"What's going on, girl? Are you saying this seriously?"

"Yes, I want you to leave, to pack up all your stuff and leave me alone, Jorge, leave."

"But why?"

He started to get impatient, but in contrast, I was as calm as the dawn. I sat down on the bed while he stood there, half dressed.

"Give me one reason, Jorge, give me one single reason why you and I are together."

He raised his head to stare at the walls, his mouth twisted, and he took a few quick steps over to pick up his shirt.

"Look, girl, it's seven in the morning and you're giving me this. I'm going to work, let's talk later, okay?"

I shook my head no, and I saw his face harden as he raised his voice.

"You really want me to leave?"

"Give me one reason why you shouldn't."

Jorge stood there for a few seconds looking at me with hatred, then his face slowly relaxed, without looking at me, lost in who knows what inside his head.

"I don't know...A reason?...! don't know."

"Then leave."

I stood up and went back to the balcony doorway to watch the morning that was beginning to fill with people. I could feel his cold eyes piercing my back.

"Then what the fuck," he started to move around quickly and opened the closet, "I've been kicked out of better places, but when I leave, I leave for good, you hear that?..."

I didn't have to answer, there was no need to. I kept standing there with my back to him, watching how the curtains of the apartment across the way were still pulled closed while on this side, Jorge was muttering words and I didn't need to look at him. I knew perfectly well that he was tossing his clothes into the suitcase, was looking for something in the bathroom, and then came back and pulled the zipper closed, furiously.

"Did you hear me? That's why you're so messed up, no one can put up with a woman who prowls around awake all night, night was made for sleeping and for fucking, you hear that? Go on like this and you'll be even more messed up than you are, that's why I'm getting the hell out of here..."

I turned my back on my neighbor's balcony and looked at Jorge with the suitcase in his hand.

"You left this," I pointed to the telescope, "It's yours."

"Keep it..., what would I want that shit for...I'm out of here..."

Jorge left the room, slamming the door like in *The Dollhouse*. He didn't want to take the telescope, he thought he didn't need it, and maybe he was right, he certainly didn't need it, but I didn't either. I didn't need it any longer. On the following nights, the curtains of the apartment across the way were never again left open. I could see that the light was being turned on and off, but I didn't need my crystal eye to see that. I'd stand out on the balcony awhile to gaze at the streets, the park full of trees, the avenue empty of traffic, knowing that over on the other side a light would be turned on and then later turned off, all through the night, even if I weren't keeping watch any longer, even if I weren't on my balcony to notice everything. I knew that. I knew perfectly well that my neighbor wouldn't be coming out to smoke and then toss the butts into the street. I didn't need him any longer, so I could close my eyes and, smile, and sleep, while out on the balcony, the eye of the night remained alone, spying on the birth of the dawn.

[translated by Mary G. Berg]

Sonia Bravo Utrera

Sandra

My name is Sandra. Sandra has a certain erotic sense and flavor, at least that's what I think. I'm here just like I could be anywhere else: I've lost all notion of who I am and it doesn't bother me a bit. I escaped from myself three years ago and although sometimes I regret it, in point of fact I'm happy. I couldn't take it any more. I had grown past the roof, yes the roof, because when the crisis got worse, I heard someone say that the Germans were through with socialism and that the solid Berlin wall fell when the roof crashed down around them. And I wonder: the roof, what roof? My roof was six feet high in an attic less than ten feet wide where on hot afternoons I hid in search of solitude. All I did was read. I read and read, from Kafka to my Conn Tellado romances, rented for one peso from the lady next door. My literature professor made me recite Kafka's *Metamorphosis* from memory, and I realized that the transformation was happening to me not to Gregory, the protagonist gripped by the terror of the absurd. Of course I was and still am very focused and never breathed a word to the teacher about Donald Duck cartoons or the mother-of-pearl princess in Conn Tellado, I was afraid she would look mockingly at me from behind her old 1960's eyeglasses. Strangely, her name is Sandra, like mine, but she's from another generation. I don't think she agrees about the roof and the Germans and the Berlin wall, and if she did she wouldn't say. She belongs to the *tabula rasa* generation: *The history of Cuba begins on January 1, 1959. Before that, we had no culture, no development, no education— nothing. Just Americans, whorehouses and Marines— understand?* Like everyone else in this country bereft of Marines and whorehouses, she's afraid and only talks about important things, such as the 8:00 nightly news with Manolo Ortega, who comes on the air now without his Hatuey beer, which, as the story went around campus, got filled one night with urine but he had to drink it anyway, savoring the foam, since Hatuey paid the bill and he didn't have the balls to say Shit! What a country, Sandra, what a country: economic progress and class struggle. I've always thought that no one believes in anything, and less so now that a salary equals ten dollars and a person can hardly act like a *homo sapiens erectus* on a breakfast of herbal tea. That's why I made my decision, period the end: at all times you do what you have to do. On hot afternoons I left the attic and went down to the Malecon to examine our Creole lady ambassadors to the United Nations and the way they dressed: today Italians, yesterday the French contingent, tomorrow the Spaniards, and the day after that, the night will be evenly divided between the Germans and the Canadians and everyone will be happy. My mother says I've lost my mind, that she never saw such things in her own house, better to hit the books and go to college, which she could never do because her mother was from the countryside and had to feed her and three other kids, and my mother, the eldest, who learned to wash and iron like an expert, became literate with the Revolution and then worked as a cook and cleaning lady in Miramar—20 diplomas as best worker, one for each of the twenty years of my life. She named me Sandra because she thought it sounded like mango and papaya, which are Cuban fruits, not California

apples that come with the worm-infested dollar inside and, though she denies it, because Sandra was the heroine's name in *Together for Eternity*, the first romance novel she ever read in loose, wet pages from a Vanidades magazine she found in the basement of the subsidized student house where she worked, that she read over and over until she fell asleep from exhaustion during the long nights of Havana socialism. My father, whom I never knew, had his socialism, too, of an international stripe, and who knows where he's buried. He was a bodyguard for one of the

commanders and came down from the Sierra with him and went with him to wage war in other places, leaving my mother and me here twenty years ago when no one expected anything to happen to the roof or the wall. A few months more and I could have been in college, with any luck studying philology and rereading Kafka, weaving Penelope into Ulysses, and I might have seriously begun analyzing literary visions from antiquity to the present time. But my visions, those that belong to me, defined the rules of this game. I started out staring at the Malecon, at the cars in front of the Riviera hotel, and then they stared back at me and I was being taken seriously by the United Nations: Italians, Spaniards, Germans, Canadians... Plenty to choose from. With the Italians I would talk about Dante and the *Divina Comedia* while we made love, with the Spaniards about The *churizo* my mother saw once in a blue moon in her poor childhood, that I had never even seen or tasted; with the Germans— well, what else? the roof and the wall. I'm an educated and politicized girl, so with the Canadians I have to be creative since to tell the truth I don't know much about them, no one ever talked about them in school. I imagined that one of them would discover in me an exotic princess who tasted of mango and papaya and after exploring my body in a foreign and universal tongue would propose to me, and period the end. No more revolution, no more attic, no college, no lit professor, no mother with lost dreams. Now it was my turn to dream and that's how my future was decided; rather than become a Kafkaesque insect to protest an unfair society I became a *puuuuta*, but of course I did it as an act of genuine protest. Hipdlito, from Valencia, who was setting up some business in the new Cuba, exclaimed "*Viva la clase obreral*" during his orgasms in my proletarian vagina; in two weeks with him I learned a lot about the history of Europe and the role the Europeans would play in preserving global balance, *of course the left must be cautious, but that doesn't mean reactionary, look at me with my modest capital I'm here to help Cuba because you know Sandra all the*

wealth is here on this side of the Atlantic, he would say as he stated that Cuban women born of the proletariat tasted like fruit. In the end Hipolito brought the long-desired *chorizos* when he came to say goodbye and my mother cried disconsolately when he placed them on the kitchen table. He left one afternoon during a downpour and promised to call in a few days. I'm still waiting. However, I'm an optimist and consolation came in the form of Gianni, an Italian photographer who got it into his head to take nude pictures of me just for him and no one else; from nude poses we graduated to positions in bed and from bed Gianni jumped like a Neopolitan house on fire when the police knocked on the door of the Hotel Nacional. He got charged with pornography and attempted rape of minors at the Playa del Este. I got off with a fine because after all I was an adult and the cops were much more interested in the case of the eight and ten year old

boys that Gianni photographed with their gentle Caribbean genitals floating in the breeze on a beach. Hans and Gert, on the other hand, finally cleared up my doubts about Berlin and the wall and appeared more than confident in German supremacy on every front; the Canadians have proven to be more than discreet, except that I get confused over whether they're from Montreal or Quebec and yes sir, I do make some mistakes about English and French and the Canadian identity. Jesus! In school I learned Russian, and who can I talk to now that no Russians are on the Malecon because they have no dollars, and English, too, but on my own, so I could read T.S. Eliot in my spare time as a young working class intellectual with a promising future and a mother who cooked, washed and ironed in the subsidized student housing when our Russian comrades were still on radio and TV, before they disappeared at a stroke of the Partycentralcommittee pen, as a philosopher working as a cab driver in free Havana said with great dialectic intelligence. Yes, all this in three years, from 1990 to 1993. Today, October 12, 1993, in the lobby of the Capri hotel where I'm sitting, I dream about those stormy afternoons in the attic with Kafka and Eliot and go nuts thinking about how to tell them about this, my metamorphosis, painful and irreversible like Gregory's, rock-like and marble-smooth like Eliot's rhythms, and thoroughly irreversible because *nowaynowaynowayJose*.

The other Sandra, my literature professor, saw me yesterday and smiled complicitly. I think she understands the reasons for my transformation and approves, she'd even be able to explain it, like performing an autopsy on a corpse, unemotionally, as one of the undesirable but feasible consequences of the socialist crisis in Cuba. I insist that I, the other Sandra with the turned-out legs in search of dollars, whose name was bestowed by my mother and the commander of the subsidized student house next door, the name in which two identical vowels dance with four consonants that explode in fricative sibilance; I, Sandra, whose name is reminiscent of mango and papaya; I, Sandra, daughter of the commander next door and my poor mother bearing up under the weight of destiny; I, Sandra, the un-disadvantaged student who might have been in college today; I, Sandra salamander, with the crocodile gullet and the snail-like waist, will find on this island in due time the mother-of-pearl prince from Tellado's tales, and it will happen here, under this sky and this sea, with its warm and pleasurable waves breaking on the shore of the city now lost but always found by its absent children, which is why I'm sitting sit here, waiting—Sorry, I can't go on about my life, a bunch of Japanese tourists are coming this way and now I know what haiku is. Go ahead and try, dear comfortable reader, to fit *sandrasalamandra* into any image worthy of a good haiku.

[translated by Nancy Festinger]

Open Your *Eyes* and Soar: Cuban Women Writing Now

Biographical summaries:

CUBAN WRITERS

Nancy Alonso is a physiology professor in Havana. Her first book of stories, *Tirar la primera piedra* [Throw the First Stone./, won honorable mention in the annual contest of the Cuban National Union of Writers and Artists in 1995. She won the 2002 Alba de Cespedes award for her second book of stories, *Cerrado por reformas* [Closed for repairs].

Aida Bahr has recently completed a novel, *Las voces y los eco*5[Voices and echoes], and is at work on another one. She is director of a publishing house in Santiago, Cuba, Ediciones Oriente, and editor of their magazine. Her work has appeared in many anthologies in Spanish and in translation into other languages. She is the author of several collections of stories, including *Hay un gato en la ventana* [There's a cat in the window] (1984), *Ellas de noche* [Women at night] (1989), *Espejismos* [Mirror images](1998), and several screenplays.

Marilyn Bobes is a short story writer, poet and journalist who was born in Havana. She studied history at the University of Havana, and worked a a journalist for the Latin American press agency, Prensa Latina, and for the magazine *Revolucidny Cullura*, In 1979 she received the David Award for Poetry for her book *La aguja en el pajar*. For her fiction, she has received an Edmundo Valde"s award (Mexico, 1993) and second place in the Magda Portal competition (Peru, 1994). Her books include *Hollar el mode* (poetry, 1989), and *Alguien tiene que llorar* [Somebody has to cry], (from which the stories included here are taken) winner of the Casa de las Americas prize in 1995, and *Alguien tiene que llorar tambien* (2001). She was a co-editor of the anthology of Cuban women's stories *Estatuas de sal* [Pillars of salt](1996).

Sonia Bravo Utrera holds a PhD in philology and is a university professor, translator and writer, currently teaching at the University de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain. She writes short stories, poetry, and literary criticism. Her current focus is on the Cuban exile experience from an ironic and unprejudiced point of view. She has translated early British travel accounts of the Canary Islands, Russian poetry and narrative, as well as prose and poetry from the Vienna school. Her translations and articles on diverse literary subjects have been published in Argentina, Uruguay, Spain, Cuba, Mexico and Russia. She is currently translating Robert Frost and analyzing translations of his work into Spanish.

Cuban feminist scholar **Luisa Campuzano** is a founder (in 1994) and director of the Women's Studies program at Casa de las Americas in Havana, She was a professor of

literature at the University of Habana before she retired in 2000. Her distinguished list of publications on Latin American culture and history includes over seventy articles and a dozen books, including a recent study of magical realist Alejo Carpentier, *Carpentier entonces y ahora* (1997) and the four-volume edited collection, *Mujeres latinoamericanas: siglos XVI al XX* [Latin American women, 16th 120* centuries].

Adelaida Fernandez de Juan is a physician specializing in internal medicine, and author of many short stories, including those published in the volumes *Dolly y otros cuentos africanos* (1994) about her experiences in Zambia 1988-90. It appeared in English as *Dolly and Other African Tales*. Her second story collection, *Oh vida* [Oh life] (1998) won the National Short Story Prize of the Cuban National Union of Writers and Artists.

Mylene Fernandez Pintado is a practicing lawyer who represents the Institute Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematograficos (ICAIC). Her stories have won prizes in the La Gaceta de Cuba competitions, in the Spanish 1998 III Premio de NH de Relates awards, and the Cuban National Union of Writers and Artists' Premio David in Cuba, for her collection of short stories, *Anhedonia* (1999). Her novel *El otro lado del espejo* [The other side of the mirror] has just been published. She is a lawyer and author of several volumes of short stories. Her work has appeared in many anthologies in Spanish, and in translation.

Ena Lucia Portela, born in Havana where she still lives, is a novelist and short story writer. She won the UNEAC National Novel Prize in 1997 for her first novel *Elpdjaro: tinta china y pincel* [The bird: Chinese ink and pen], published in 1999, as was her collection of short stories, *Una extrana entre las piedras* [A strange woman among the stones]. She was the recipient of the Juan Rulfo Short Story Prize given by Radio France International in 1999 for her short story, "El viejo, el asesino y yo" ["The old man, the assassin and I"]. Her novel *La sombra del caminante* [The walker's shadow] was published in 2001, and a third novel, *Cien botellas en una pared* [One Hundred bottles on a waliy, won the Jaen Novel Prize in Spain in 2002.

Karla Suarez was born in Havana, and presently resides in Rome, where she is a systems engineer, much of the year. Her collection of stories, *Espuma* [Foam], published in 1999, which includes the stories included here, has won many awards. Her first novel, *Silencios* [Silences], received the Lengua de Trapo Fiction Prize in 1999, and has been translated into many languages.

Anna Lidia Vega Serova was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, daughter of a Cuban father and a Russian mother. She has lived in Havana since she was 20, and writes exclusively in Spanish. She won the 1996 Special Prize of the Asociaci6n Hermanos Saiz, and the 1997 Premio David for her collection of stories *Bad Painting* (1997). Her second volume of stories, *Catdlogo de mascotas* [Catalog of mascots} was published in 1998, and a novel is soon to appear.

Mirta Yanez, has written fiction, poetry, literary criticism, and children's books, and has taught Latin American literature at the University of Havana. In 1988 and 90 she won the Critics' Prize for the story collection *El Diablo son las cosas* and for the essay *La narrativa del romanticismo en Latinoamerica* [Romantic narrative in Latin America]. Other books she has published include *Las visitas y otros poemas* [The visits and other poems] (1986) *Una memoria de elefante* [An elephant's memory] (1991). She is the co-editor of the anthology of Cuban women's stories *Estatuas de sal* [Pillars of salt] published in 1996, and the editor of *Cubana: Contemporary Fiction by Cuban*

TRANSLATORS

Mary G. Berg's recent translations from Spanish include novels: *I've Forgotten Your Name* (forthcoming) by Martha Rivera (Dominican Republic); *River of Sorrows* (2000) by Libertad Demitropulos (Argentina); and *Ximena at the Crossroads* (1998) by Laura Riesco (Peru), as well as stories, women's travel accounts, literary criticism, and collections of poetry, most recently poems by Carlota Caulfield and *Starry Night* (1996) by Marjorie Agosin (Chile). She teaches at Harvard and M.I.T. and is a Visiting Scholar at the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University, where she writes about Latin American writers, including Clorinda Matto de Turner, Juana Manuela Gorriti, Soledad Acosta de Samper, and contemporary Cubans.

Pamela Carmell teaches Spanish in St. Louis. She is a founding member of the St. Louis Translators Roundtable. She has translated Luisa Valenzuela, Ena Lucia Portela, Mirta Yanez, Carlos Cortes among others. Her translations have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies. Her translation of Antonio Larreta's novel, *The Last Portrait of the Duchess of Alba* was a Book of the Month Club selection. Her translation of poems by Belkis Cuza Male, *Woman on the Front Lines*, received the Witter Bynner Prize. Her translations of poems by Nancy Morejon will be included in a collection to be published by White Pine Press.

Dick Cluster's translations of Cuban fiction include *Cubana: Contemporary Fiction by Cuban Women* (Beacon, 1998, ed. Mirta Yanez, tr. With Cindy Schuster); Pedro de Jestis, *Frigid Tales* (City Lights, 2002); Alejandro Hernandez Diaz, *The Cuban Mile* (Latin American Literary Review Press, 1998); Antonio José Ponte, *In the Cold of the Malecón and Other Stories* (City Lights, 2000); Leonardo Padura, *Mascaras* (selection, Whereabouts Press, 2002); and Abel Prieto, *The Flight of the Cat* (forthcoming). He is also the author of the novels *Return to Sender* (Dutton, 1988), *Repulse Monkey* (Dutton, 1989), and *Obligations of the Bone* (St. Martins, 1992), and translator of Cuban political scientist Rafael Hernandez's essay collection *Looking at Cuba* (UP of Florida, 2003).

Sara E. Cooper is currently an Assistant Professor of Spanish and Women's Studies at California State University, Chico. She has published articles on Alejo Carpentier, Alma Lopez and Charrie Moraga, Marilene Felinto, and Cristina Peri Rossi.

Two of her translations were included in *Urban Voices: Contemporary Short Stories From Brazil*. Current projects include a critical analysis of queer family and women in Latin American literature and the editing of two volumes: a multi-authored volume of critical essays on family systems in Hispanic literature and a collection of translated short stories by the Cuban writer Mirta Ydnez.

Cristina de la Torre has translated three novels: *Absent Love (Crdnica del desamor)* by Rosa Montero (Spain), *Mirror Images (Jocde miralls/Por persona interpuesta)* by Carmen Riera (Spain) and *A Single, Numberless Death (Una sola muerte numerosa)* by Nora Strejilevich (Argentina) as well as numerous short stories, many of them by authors from Cuba where she was born. She lives in Atlanta and teaches Spanish at Emory University.

Nancy Festinger is a native New Yorker with published translations from French, Spanish and modern Provençal. She works as Chief Interpreter in the federal court in Manhattan and is editor of *Proteus*, the newsletter of the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators.

Anne Fountain teaches Latin American literature and culture at San Jose State University. She has taught at the University of Southern Mississippi, the University of South Florida, and Peace College, where she was named Alumnae Distinguished Professor in 1994. She is the author of *Versos Sencillos by Jose Marti - A Translation* [Romance Monographs, 2000] and *Jose Marti and U.S. Writers* [University Press of Florida, 2003].