

Home

Carlos Eire

I'm always there. Wait, no, it's the other way around. *There* is always here, with me, wherever I am, wherever *here* is. It could be Reykjavík; it could be Cuernavaca. Or Hohokus, or Oconomowoc, or Cucamonga. It doesn't matter; I bring *there* with me, in my marrow, in the core of my soul. With my third eye I see something that looks like the Holy of Holies, dimly. I see angels shrouding their faces with their huge wings.

I'm home.

I carry home within me, imperfectly imagined, but intact. And the angels brandish flaming swords, to guard it, and to rebuke me.

I'm in exile.

And I've been in exile for a long time: 79.45455 % of my whole life, as of today, to be precise. I'm always counting, keeping track of the days, months, and years since I left Cuba. Not because I want to go back, mind you, but simply for the hell of it. Literally. Reckoning the distance you've put between yourself and hell is one of life's sweetest pleasures.

I don't ever want to go back to that home. Not now, not ever. *Per omnium saecula saeculorum*.

Never again.

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Besides, there's no *there* there anymore, just as there's no *then* in the here and now. I've seen recent photos of my neighborhood, my street, and my house. I've stared for hours at those crumbling, abscessed homes; those eerie empty spaces where trees once stood; those billowing clouds far above—untouched by decay—and that ghostly stranger sweeping my porch, whose image was surreptitiously captured by another exile who had returned for a brief visit, a fellow expatriate armed with a digital camera, who now lives in Stockholm, of all places.

Seeing those photos on my computer screen was a lot like looking in the mirror and finding someone else's face staring back at me. I suppose this is what can happen when you lose your home suddenly and unjustly.

My home was stolen from me and now this unfamiliar woman lives in it. It's her house now and she cares for *her* front porch, very much, the porch that is my earliest memory of all, the one spot on earth where I first awoke to my existence, the porch that is the quintessence of me.

Don't get me wrong. I don't give a damn about the house. It's not the loss of property that pains me, but the fact that the whole stinking deal was cloaked as a just and righteous thing, and all the world swallowed the lie and cheered for the thief, and that I and all others who fled are taken for selfish troglodytes who didn't want to share our belongings with the poor.

Our very exile is denied to us, constantly. "You didn't have to leave," I've been told thousands of times, here in exile. "You left because you didn't want to share your wealth with the people you exploited."

What many people fail to realize is that we who left Cuba did so because Fidel's so-called Revolution was a monstrous, soul-stealing entity. It wasn't just that the Revolution sought to possess our houses and belongings, but that it ached to own our minds and souls and our very selves, and to be worshiped and obeyed unconditionally. I don't begrudge that woman her new house, nor would I reclaim it, if given the chance. It may have been my house once, and may remain ensconced in my memory as *home*, but it's not really home. Not at all. Neither is that whole city, Havana, nor that whole long and narrow island.

I have my reasons for loving and hating that home all at once, for cherishing my memories and for wishing that the whole place would sink into the sea and vanish from the face of the earth.

At the age of eleven my parents were so desperate to save me and my brother from bondage to the Revolution that they put us on a plane, and sent us to the United States by ourselves, even though we had no relatives or friends waiting on this side to take us in. We all hoped we could reunite soon, preferably in a free Cuba, but it didn't turn out

that way. My brother and I were tossed from one foster home to another for three and a half years, and for a brief eternity hit bottom in a house full of juvenile delinquents. As my brother and I drifted about, our mother's efforts to join us in the States were repeatedly thwarted by the Cuban government. Our father was not allowed to leave. Mom finally gained exit through Mexico, after knocking on many an embassy door and badgering every bureaucrat she could find. My father remained behind and died alone in our house, fourteen years, five months, and seventeen days after our departure. I never really got to know the man, or how he felt about losing us. All of our correspondence during that time was monitored. So were our infrequent phone conversations, each of which would be abruptly cut off by the Cuban authorities after a mere three minutes. Once, when our mother said "I miss you" to our father, the Cuban eavesdropper at the other end started to laugh.

Multiply my story fourteen thousand times. That's the number of Cuban children sent by their parents to the United States out of sheer desperation between 1960 and 1962. Multiply my parents' story by the thousands too, and the monitored three-minute phone calls by the tens of thousands. No one knows for sure how many families ever got back together. Add to this another two million stories. That's the latest estimate on the number of Cubans living abroad, and it doesn't include those who have died over the past five decades after living in exile for many years, like my mother, or the tens of thousands who have drowned at sea while trying to flee in makeshift vessels or inner tubes. Right now, all in all, about twenty percent of Cubans on earth live outside of their native land. If the same were true of the United States, there would be fifty million Americans in exile.

I'm not alone, then. Apparently, I have lots of company. But all of us tend to feel alone, collectively, as if gripped by some peculiar angst. Sometimes I suspect that numbers make no difference when it comes to this feeling, or that if they do, it's in some kind of inverse equation: the more of us there are in any one spot, the deeper our disquiet. I suspect that Cubans in south Florida, where there are about a million of us, feel a stronger sense of alienation than I do, up here in the frozen north. Down there they are all so close to home and so numerous, that they are able to retain much more of their Cuban identity. This means that by feeling, thinking, and acting as Cubans all the time they are constantly aware of their otherness, of the fact that they are somewhere else, in a counterfeit home, in someone else's land.

So it seems to me that an exile is always alone, no matter what. It makes no difference where we're from. Rwanda or Cambodia, Bosnia or China: it's always the same. Exiles tend to bunch up near one another, if given the chance. And quite often, enclaves of exiles from different lands string themselves one next to the other, like pearls on a string. Or beads on a rosary.

Is this a good thing, or not? I can't speak for all exiles. All I know is that I treasure my loss and my dislocation, and count myself lucky.

Home ceased to exist as a real place on a map the moment when I first left Cuba, years and years ago. But it didn't cease to exist altogether. Quite the opposite happened: home became a place beyond time and space, a reality more vivid and intense and immediate than any that one could hope for in this world.

I'm so grateful for the theft, and the loss, and the rage that wells up in me when I think about it. The rage is wonderfully bittersweet, as is exile itself.

Exile can be a mixed blessing, and an immersion in paradox. At least that's how it has been for me, and for most of the other Cubans I know. Our exile has been a coincidence of opposites, the infolding of all conflicting emotions: elation at being free; utter dejection at losing your whole family; a sense of pride in your identity; a dire need to shed your otherness; reverence for your motherland; contempt for the brethren who drove you out; thankfulness for your good fortune in a new land; an irrepressible rage against those who label you a "hispanic" or, worse, call you a "person of color" even though your skin is lighter than theirs.

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As with any mixed blessing, one's attitude can make a world of difference. Is the glass half empty or half full? I ask myself this question so often that it has turned into a mantra. And so has the answer to the question: of course, the glass is half full. Or one third full, or one quarter full. Or even less than one percent full. As long as there's a drop in the glass, the glass is partially full. And I will focus on that drop and be thankful for it.

When I look at the big picture rather than at my own narrow circumstances, I have to admit that I'm immensely lucky. I don't have to live in a totalitarian state. Had I remained in Cuba, I would be either in prison or dead. Looking at the big picture, I also realize that home is more of an idea and more of a feeling than a place, even though our minds and hearts seem to be programmed to focus on place. When one moves from one place to another, the new dwelling can instantly become home, even for those who live alone. I often ask myself: do homeless vagrants consider their cardboard box or their subway tunnel home? I'm sure some of them do.

Home is not only a place, though. It's also people. In fact, it's a combination of place and people. One's old house ceases to be home once it fills up with new people one doesn't know at all. For most of us, home is a potent mix of emotions linked to our parents or guardians and the places where we dwelt when we were children.

In exile, I learned quickly to make every dwelling my home. Of course, I did this blindly, without thinking. It was more of an instinct than a rational plan. Even in a house full of juvenile delinquents, in a slum, in Miami, I tried to feel at home. Of course, it was hard to do, and it didn't work all the time. I missed my home, my parents, my

relatives, and my friends. I missed them too much. When one loves deeply, absence itself becomes an overwhelming presence: what one feels most intensely is the hole, the vacuum, the loss.

But as time passes, the absence recedes into the background. It recedes like a river after a flood has passed, or like the sea at low tide. It also ebbs and flows like the tides. Eventually, one gets so used to the absence one doesn't even notice it. Or one begins to embrace it and love it, as part of one's very self. Before long, without fanfare, a transformation can take place. The loss is locked up in a secure vault, deep in the recesses of one's consciousness.

It doesn't always happen this way to everyone, I know. All I am saying is that this *can* happen, if one opens oneself to it. You may have noticed a few lines ago that I suddenly switched from "I" to "one"—from speaking in the first person perspective to a more abstract and universal one. This is because I think that any exile's experience, including my own, can be seen as a microcosm of the universal predicament all humans share.

In many ways, exile is a fitting metaphor for life on earth. Sages and poets have long known this. Most of the world's great religions—and many of its minor ones too—rest upon the assumption that the origin and eventual destiny of the human lie beyond this world. Any Hindu or Buddhist can tell you this. Long ago, Socrates and Plato also knew it, and so did all of their disciples. Some ancients turned the insight into their central myth about the human condition, contending that all human beings on earth hail from a realm purer and better than earth, that we are all spirits trapped in an inferior material world. Some of these ancients went as far as to argue that earth was hell, and that we were all here as a punishment.

In a less extreme version, the same insight lies at the heart of the Christian religion. Jesus of Nazareth, for one, emphasized this teaching, and, as the gospels tell us, even willingly died to prove his point. His advice was as clear as it was difficult to follow:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.¹

Jesus's disciples made this teaching the cornerstone of Christian ethics. Open a New Testament at random, and chances are you will find a passage encouraging you not to find your home on earth. I tried it three times, just now, and here is what I found: "Whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord"; "Our citizenship is

¹ Matthew 6:19–21.

in heaven”; “Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come.”² And that’s just three passages. There are hundreds more where those came from, sometimes several on the same page. No wonder many Christians came to think of heaven as home, of life on earth as a pilgrimage, and of our bodies as a pilgrim’s cloak. And it’s not just ancient and medieval Christians I’m talking about. Just yesterday, while watching a television news report about a fatal car wreck, I heard a man say about his dead relative: “She’s gone home...she’s home now, in heaven.”

But one need not be a Christian to think this way. The idea that we humans are immortal and that we somehow continue to exist after death can be found in most religions, and even outside of religion. The notion of an eternal home is a very powerful one. So powerful, one might argue, that it allows us to endure life’s many trials. But one must pause and consider that this myth of an eternal home isn’t derived solely from the awful fact of death and the hope for life eternal. It’s also derived from the wondrous mystery of birth, and of the utter simplicity of childhood, with all its absolute joys and traumas. For most of us on earth, it is the purely emotional memory of infancy and early childhood that shapes our concept of home. No matter how detached we may feel from that first house and our parents and relatives, our notion of home—itself a highly emotional image—is largely derived from that place where we entered the world and those people who nurtured us and showed us love and affection. Even abused children, so we are told, tend to derive their sense of home from their earliest environment.

Ultimately, then, home is not so much a place as a complex set of emotions linked to our earliest memories. Wordsworth’s sublime poem, “Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” sums this up with grace to spare:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
 The Soul that rises with us, our life’s Star,
 Hath had elsewhere its setting,
 And cometh from afar:
 Not in entire forgetfulness,
 And not in utter nakedness,
 But trailing clouds of glory do we come
 From God, who is our home:
 Heaven lies about us in our infancy!³

So if heaven is our home, can we ever imagine it, or ever feel as if we’ve arrived? Do we have to die or become children again in order to go home?

² 2 Corinthians 5:6; Philippians 3:20; Hebrews 13:14.

³ William Wordsworth, “Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” [1807], 5.58–66, *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (1904; London: Oxford University Press, 1961) 460.

Stupid questions.

We all know when we're home. But home never remains the same. As time passes, home changes. It is a feeling, more than anything else. As one trite saying has it: home is where the heart is; as another trite saying has it: you can never go home again.

But, of course, it's more than that. Home is as much an inner compass as a wish list. Sometimes we find it here on earth; sometimes, only in our dreams. I have a place I go to regularly in my dreams, a place that feels more like home than anything in my waking life. It's a beautiful world: an odd mixture of familiar sights and unimaginable topography and architecture, peopled by old acquaintances and wonderful characters I've never met before. Whenever I'm ferried there by sleep, I know I've come home. I feel so at peace, so firmly rooted in eternity. My dreamland home is thus both a place and a feeling, at once familiar and surprisingly new, a reality built out of the tiniest details in my memory and also out of my fondest hopes and dreams. Nothing ever goes wrong when I am there, other than the fact that at some point, within the dream itself, I realize that I'm not really there. At that point, I usually wake up, and feel the weight of my exile.

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What is that place? Where is it? When is it? It's that last question that really intrigues me. The most wonderful thing about my home in dreamland is the fact that it's outside of time, that it's eternal. It has always been and always will be. And it's part of my very self. I can recognize the bits and pieces of the familiar, which, like bricks that make a wall, give my dreamland home its structure.

I see bits of every place I've called home, and I also see bits and pieces of every place I've ever visited.

I find myself at the western tip of the Ile de la Cité in Paris, the Seine River flowing at my right and my left. I feel roots springing from my soul, sinking into the ground beneath the cobblestones, reaching into infinity. I plunge into the Seine, and the current sweeps me away to Havana. In the wink of an eye, I find myself on the Malecón, by the seashore, marveling at the breaking waves and the magnificent buildings that line the road, some of which were brought there from Barcelona, ancient Rome, and Miami Beach. There's no sun to rise or set. Everything is lit as if from within, and it's dawn and sunset and midday all at once. Suddenly, the Malecón turns into the impossibly flat Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, and I feel my mother's presence, and before I know it the road begins to climb and twist, and I'm on the Amalfi coast. As I round the bend on a hairpin turn, I'm in Dalmatia, somewhere near Dubrovnik, about to descend the eastern ridge of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and I see Thomas Jefferson's house, Monticello, atop the red cliff of East Rock in New Haven, and before I know it I'm somewhere I haven't ever been before, but somehow I know I've always been there

and always will be. I see no monuments to Happiness. Come to think of it, I see no monuments at all, or temples, but I feel as if I'm inside the best temple of all. I don't ever see any angels either, but I feel I'm being watched by someone who always has my best interests at heart. I feel loved, unconditionally. And whenever anyone shows up, they speak without words, and all of us in this place don't ever have to explain anything to one another. We also never need to apologize, or lie, or feel ashamed.

And I carry all this within me, wherever I go, somehow. And I wonder whether all of it is as ephemeral as the shadow cast by a vulture when it circles fitfully, several yards above some carrion.

I wonder and wonder.

And suddenly, I wonder no more.

I'm at my mother's bedside, holding her hand in a Chicago hospital, not far from Lake Michigan, which, when it's not frozen, looks a lot like the sea in Havana. A spring thunderstorm rages outdoors. She's unconscious and at death's door, and gurgling loudly as she breathes. It's close to midnight, and by now all other visitors have gone home, and the doctors and nurses have given up for good. I'm there alone with her, waiting for the inevitable, praying without words, with my eyes closed. Every now and then I look up when I feel and hear the rumble of the elevated train. The sparks from the train mimic the lightning in the clouds, lending an evanescent glow to the hospital's exterior walls.

For so many years, when our home was right next to the elevated train, that predictable rumble felt like the pulse of our basement apartment, of our very lives.

I close my eyes once more and continue my wordless vigil. All of a sudden: Zap! Whoosh! A powerful electrical current surges from my mother's hand to mine, and then the stinging current sweeps instantly through my entire body, into my brain, and into the deepest core of my being.

I'm home at last.

Somehow, without words, I understand what my mother is showing me and telling me. Wait, to speak of "understanding" isn't quite right. It's much more than that. Suddenly, I'm home. It's an awareness, a kind of vision so clear it makes me feel as if I've just begun to live for real, as if I've awakened, at last. This is way beyond anything a third eye could see, let alone imagine. And I realize I've always been there, and will always be there, along with my mother and my loved ones, and realize it with a kind of certainty and lucidity that dwarfs everything I know and makes it seem totally hollow by comparison.

Aha! Yes! Of course! I say to myself. This is as real, as necessary, and as much a part of my very self as my own breathing. This is it!

At that very same instant, my mother breathes her last and I find myself once again in the here and now, exiled.

I come back to Connecticut, bury my mom's ashes in the graveyard at the end of my road, and go about the business of living and dreaming.

Is it because I am a refugee that I dream of home the way I do and find home everywhere and nowhere at the same time? I've never bothered to ask before. Maybe it's even more of a stupid question than the ones above. But then, again, who knows, maybe it's the best question that ever popped into my head.

I'm not much of a gambler. Casinos and lottery tickets give me the willies, and I'm clumsy with cards and dice. But I'm willing to wager real money that such dreams can be dreamt by anyone, that all of us, as Wordsworth put it, "have sight of that immortal sea / Which brought us hither," and that

Hence in a season of calm weather
 Though inland far we be,
 Our Souls...
 Can in a moment travel thither,
 And see the Children sport upon the shore,
 And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.⁴

Would you like to bet on it?

⁴ Wordsworth 9.165–71.