

Ángel Santiesteban

Wolves in the Night / *Lobos en la noche*

16 stories from Cuba

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A powerful new voice from Cuba

The Cuban author Ángel Santiesteban has consistently spoken out against arbitrary justice and repression. His short stories are shot through with personal experience and cover a wide spectrum from the fantastic to the harrowingly real. A character disappears from her novel to escape censorship; a starving band of men sets out in the depths of the night to steal meat from dead cattle; in the middle of a wild party, a soldier is suddenly haunted by memories of the war in Angola.

Santiesteban portrays a different Cuba, one that jars with the picture-postcard idyll and the seemingly effortless Caribbean flair for life.

Born in Havana in 1966, **Ángel Santiesteban** is Cuba's literary conscience. For many years he was his generation's most celebrated writer, winning every major literary prize in his country. Yet when he began to write a blog critical of the regime, loshijosquenadiequiso.blogspot.com ("The children nobody wanted"), he was repeatedly threatened and eventually sentenced to a prison term. He is currently out on parole after an intervention by the German foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, but he is banned from publishing in Cuba.

Translated by Katie Brown

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They're coming for you, Mandela!

To the dreadful Cuban penitentiary system,
in particular prison 15-80 in Havana.
May they seize this story to stop it reaching
the outside world and flying free.

Today is the ninth day of my hunger strike. They threw me naked into a cell and forgot about me. I can barely make out my hands. From daybreak the heat makes me sweat, and at night the cold keeps me awake. My concrete mattress causes stabbing pains in whichever body part rests on it. In the early hours I hear cries from the adjacent cells.

When they transferred me, the Head of Public Order was waiting along with ten guards; the inmates rightly noted this unusual move, which kept them guessing. Rumour spread that they were bringing in someone dangerous, someone wondered whether I would be a monster like Hannibal Lecter, striking fear into the prison population, until they found out that I am a *plantado*, an unrepentant political prisoner. My neighbouring convict fills me in, he says he's happy I'm a good person because then I won't hurt the elephants. I keep quiet trying to get the joke. Then he assures me that they're grazing outside. What are you talking about? I ask. Can't you see them? he replies. They're there, right in front of your eyes, he insists, behind that apparent darkness. Their skin is a strange green colour. And I stare intently because I want to glimpse them, I need to, and my gaze wanders in that intensity like a kite with a broken string, which conspires with the wind and rises until it is lost among the clouds. I fall into the void, giddy, tossed and turned, it's like a drug, it transports me through time and space; then I start to make out a faint movement, leaves blowing in the wind, I smell earth and dew-damp grass, and I see the mastodons in their natural habitat, dancing their trunks in time to the tune of Gabriel's oboe.

"You enjoyed that!" interrupts my neighbour. "Now relax after your long trip... I'll keep watch, I'll protect them."

I feel exhausted. My body is covered in sweat. My legs are stiff, as if I'd crossed the jungle. An impertinent thirst claws at my throat, cats clamouring to escape. I sleep in the torpor of a blackout.

I ignore the prison warden who tries to threaten me into eating again. After he leaves, the prisoners ask me if I'm going to keep it up. Scared that I'll lose heart, they holler that I'm like Mandela, you're beating them, you've got them worried, don't give up.

They hear me laugh and they applaud.

"He's staying", announces the one they call Island.

That night I'm visited by dizzy spells, if I make the slightest movement the darkness starts to spin. I hadn't realised that in the middle of nothing I can lose a point that, even though I can't locate it, exists.

The inmates always want to know how it's going. Replying "going" is enough. I refuse the doctors who come to measure my vital signs. The worst part isn't even the hunger, which disappears after three days, it's the fear of losing my teeth, my sight, vomiting blood and then not being myself anymore if the worst happens, if I stay alive; but the sacrifice is worth it, because a cry in the darkness turns to light in the chest of the distressed.

Then in that solitude, a nearby voice calls me by that nickname, Mandela, and I don't reply, I don't want to be someone else, I won't accept it. I'm filled with mistrust, they could be daydreams, tricks of the imagination, mental traps that want to save me. But he insists, it's me, Island, they let me out for shearing, he says, and he approaches my bars. What? Be strong, he begs, resist, we're proud of you, we see ourselves represented in your struggle, if you get the DAs to come here then they'll have to think about us too. Cos we're just ordinary cases they don't care about us, he explains, they never listened to the two who died months ago in that same cell you're in. I've swallowed glass, knives, without getting anyone to notice my complaints, demanding my rights against the injustices committed. They don't care about us.

"Mandela" he says across a corridor separated by two sets of bars, "you're our only hope. Without you we're powerless, we lose everything."

In the morning I dream of the breeze frolicking in my face. A sense of pleasure washes over me, forcing a smile, and I wake up. I feel an itch on my nose and as I scratch it I discover a cockroach, which I throw off in disgust and which makes me search the rest of my body. It horrifies me to think that Papillon had to eat them to survive.

The sneering soldiers approach my bars and warn me that I will die soon. I don't respond. Silence is the best weapon. They turn the lights on in the corridor, the sudden brightness is unbearable, it hits me like the sun, striking my senses, and I seek refuge in a corner trying to protect my eyes.

They enter and I don't see them coming. They immobilise me with the help of restraints that they pull as tight as possible around my wrists and ankles. Seated, they cover my nose, forcing me to breathe through my mouth for a moment, which they take advantage of to force-feed me a foul, suffocating liquid.

The inmates shout from their cells and the guards stop, go out to hit them. Some avoid the guards by covering themselves in excrement, and keeping some back to throw at them.

"We'll be back when this muck dries", they assure us and leave.

Straight away, Island asks how I'm doing. I've already vomited up the foul liquid and respond that I'm well, as I spit and cough.

"They can't beat you, Mandela", he shouts.

The cold grips me earlier than on previous nights. Island tells me his life story, how he migrated from Girona to Havana seeking prosperity; but he didn't find it because of a stitch up in which the police were complicit. I don't remember when I stopped paying attention to him. As if time has passed in a flash, it is morning and there is Island, finished with his story, looking like he hasn't slept, wishing me good morning and informing me that everyone is ready to support me, regardless of the consequences, any time they try to overpower me.

After three days, once the officials have tried to convince me to have breakfast, the guards apply the same procedure to make me swallow the rancid soup, and again I vomit and have diarrhoea.

Island makes it clear that he's uncomfortable with letting them keep abusing me like this, something has to be done! He asks to join me in solidarity, a general strike, so I try to talk him round, explaining that this is my fight and they have to put up with their suffering, that I can't prevent that, and then I'm too tired to speak anymore. He maintains a silence that I take as a scream of impotence.

"Don't you worry, Mandela", Island says, "we'll work this out."

I had been trying to communicate with the elephant tamer for a few days. At times I pretended to see that vision again, to enter into that fantasy without managing it. I thought that perhaps I needed to repeat some magic words, the unforgettable babbling brook from childhood, something like permission to step into the spirit world, to dive into the kaleidoscope and lose myself in the figures made by the coloured glass, and I keep calling him, unanswered. I imagine him wandering through that jungle of no one and nothing, admiring his green elephants.

Once I give up, I hear his voice getting louder, that perennial lament now just about audible.

"They left", he says.

"Who?"

"The elephants", and he starts to cry.

"Where did they go?"

"I don't know, they were taken away."

"Perhaps they'll bring them back."

"Impossible" he says with the utmost certainty. "The soldiers drove them off, and they never give anything back."

A marine silence looms, that of the deepest ocean, the kind from which no human being can ever return.

At lunchtime I hear a commotion, rushed steps, and the sound of the bars. We're coming for you Mandela! You're free! I can't understand, and it confuses me to see them with the keys. They turn on the blinding lights, breaking the endless night that reigns in my eyes. When I can make them out the group is in front of me, I ask them to speak so that I can recognise them by voice, and as they do I name them.

Island is the first and the most familiar, it's he who answers my what's happened, where are the guards? I notice he's missing teeth, and he has stab wounds down his arms. He assures me that they're ok, they locked them up in a cell, gagged and bound, together with the two inmates who work as cleaners. "They won't be fucking with us any more", Southpaw says, "I wanna watch them bleed out". And in his eyes I see the violence characteristic of murderers.

"I'm not going to let anyone hurt or injure the guards, just as I won't accept that happening to the prisoners", I say with as much energy as I can muster. They all fall silent. "We have to regain order, return them to their posts and us to our cells."

Southpaw complains, they did it for me, to free me from my daily abuses. I try to make them understand that this is part of the battle, and the response has to be non-violent because that's what makes us different, otherwise we'd be just like them. More than a political change, we're fighting for a human change.

They look at me disillusioned. Then I pass along the cells and lock each one in in turn, as they glare at me uncomprehendingly. I go to the elephant tamer's cell. He's a hermit lost in oblivion. Sitting on the floor, his head leaning on the bars, and his dry gaze lost in the distance. I greet him and he doesn't respond, I touch his shoulder and it's cold, I move it and he remains still.

I head towards the four who've been gagged to free them, I remove the rags, explain that what happened was the result of the abuses they commit, and that they should take into account how we restored order under the weight of our own consciences, and that they mustn't now take advantage of us and seek revenge. They appear to agree, and ask for their restraints to be removed. I release the prisoners first and then hand them the keys, so they can find me in my cell once they're freed.

At once the soldiers check that the prisoners are locked in. Assured of their control once again, they begin to shout curses, to swear vengeance, and after bringing over the Duty Officer, they tell him what happened. Later they return with water cannons, thanking us with jets that thrust us against the walls. I swallow water. I move around trying to find a mouthful of oxygen, but I can't, I keep getting water in my mouth, my nose, my ears, I feel like I'm at the bottom of the sea.

When they're done they handcuff me and drag me out to the patio in the sun. They bring the others in the same way. They kick us every time they pass by, blows that draw whimpers. The pain of restraints cutting into flesh causes us to cry out for them to be loosened, and we only get laughs in response.

Island is regretting giving up the riot without negotiating, you betrayed us Mandela, he says. Another asserts that it's all the same because they would have lied to us. Southpaw is angry he didn't kill them, at least then the punishment would have been deserved.

"I did nothing to them, damn it!" Southpaw laments. "With everything those sons of bitches have done to us!"

Then the guards start to strike him, they kick him so hard that after a while the blows sound amorphous, hollow, as if there were no breath left in his body, only an empty structure that offers no resistance. And that's when they react, they look us over, perhaps surprised, and drag him back to the cells while we decide to hold back and a silent scream of protest dies in our throats.

When the sun sets they return us to our cells with shoves and kicks. The guards line up on both sides, making a human corridor to whip us savagely as we pass through, making sure that we won't try it again. They lock us up, removing our handcuffs. We can barely feel our arms and the circulation of our blood is painful, it takes time to move our muscles.

"They're coming for you, Mandela", Island warns.

They lift me and drag me handcuffed outside. His shadow catches my eye. And I see Southpaw hanging from the iron bars of the window. His mouth and eyes don't express his agonising suffocation. They take me to the barber. I realise that they will order my head to be shaved. Then they ask if I'm going to confess to being the leader of the riot. I don't reply.

“If you don’t want to talk we’re happy to oblige”, they say as they thrust a rag into my mouth, those same guards who I had removed them from. They laugh. “Did you think you were going to get your own way? That after the riot you’d come out as the hero?”

“We know you’re intelligent”, another says, “but you underestimated us.”

And they turn out the light. The old barber’s chair begins to spin faster and faster and they beat me all over with their batons.

I’m not aware of when they stopped, not even of at what point or how they returned me to my cell. Luckily I passed out. I smell of excrement, I pat myself down, I make sure it’s me, I’m also covered in urine. Nobody speaks. The prisoners remain silent. No food has been given out since the riot, an enforced hunger strike as punishment. The pain in my head is intense and the need to sleep is agonising. Sleep is the only form of escape in this hell. I remember the Count of Monte Cristo. I feel like Edmond Dantès imprisoned in the Château d’If. In that way, I leave behind reality.

In the morning they open the cell and I flee to a corner, I don’t want them to take me back to the barber’s chair. I couldn’t bear another blow either, nor being force-fed again. They’re beating me, I’m throwing in the towel, I beg for mercy; but they don’t listen, they handcuff me and drag me out again, no one puts up a fight, the others act like they’re not there, or perhaps they really aren’t, maybe they’ve been transferred to other prisons; now I’m the loneliest man in the universe. They stop, I scream, I pass the body of the hermit covered with a sheet, around him I see the elephants, forlorn and emaciated. In the patio they take off my handcuffs and dump me on the ground.

After a while I try to open my eyelids a crack so that my eyes can adjust to the light. I slowly recognise the place. It’s the basketball court. I look all around me and I am alone. I search for some shade to relieve the stinging in my body.

“Mandela”, they shout.

Startled, I try to point myself towards Island’s voice. I reply. It doesn’t matter if it’s my imagination, I need to know what fate befell them, fool myself if necessary and alleviate the hopelessness of not knowing.

“Mandela”, he repeats.

I watch him approach, he’s alone and unchained. With difficulty, I manage to stand. I don’t know how a human body can withstand so much! I open my arms to welcome him as is due and to show him what joy he is bringing me. As he nears I notice a suspicious gleam between his hands, he strikes and I feel the metal penetrate my body. I fall onto his triceps.

I observe him intently, trying to recall his clear eyes, now moist, in those few minutes of daring in the cells.

“What about the fight?” I ask him.

“I was hungry!”

“And your principles?”

“They emasculated me.”

“How will we achieve justice?”

“They promised me freedom”, he justifies himself and embraces me.

Above his shoulder I see the perimeter guard aim his rifle at us. I try to cover him and he spots him, then smiles and refuses protection.

“It’s better than nothing, Mandela!” he says, offering me his transparent glance. “I couldn’t bear any more. They beat me.”

A shot like lightning in the darkest night splits open his skull, we fall to the ground, our blood flows together.

“Me too”, I say, and the long awaited peace arrives.