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José Martí in Central Park

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José Martí in Central Park

(I)

José Martí

charges down the Avenue of the Americas
on his rearing bronze stallion, larger than life,
intellectual bald pate cocked to one side.

Frozen in motion

at the 59th Street entrance to Central Park,

his statue looks south

down 6th Avenue,

as though raring to go

on his quest for a united Americas

south of the US border.

The poet of the people on a bronze stallion.

Hero, martyr, symbol, I am not sure who he is

when I first see his statue, and then again and again,

between ten and thirteen, on long walks through Central Park

with my mother Vera, Cuban born, who never talks about it.

In the tiny studio apartment in Queens,

a worn hard cover book

has Martí's image on the front.

I don't read Spanish,

but, sometimes,

look through the book.

Guantanamera, Guajira, Guantanamera.

His words made popular by Pete Seeger singing and shouting out
under the highway next to South Street Seaport on the East River.

Pete Seeger leading the song in Central Park and Carnegie Hall.

Pete Seeger on the deck of the Clearwater at a stop on the Hudson.

Pete Seeger, the poet of the people, who mostly didn't trust him,
unless they already agreed, and wondered at his commie blacklisting.

Guantanamera.

The fights of the old world and the new continue.

Nothing has changed. Well, not much has changed. The players change names,
rearrange roles. The rich get richer. The poor despair, or look for unlikely heroes.

The ones in the middle, they haven't decided yet.

José Martí, still on his rearing bronze horse,

still looking down the Avenue of the Americas,

yes 6th Avenue, past the toney shops

and the lavish high rises, the theatres with ticket prices that could

feed a family of four for a year, elsewhere.

“Con los pobres de la tierra,” he wrote,

“Quiero yo mi suerte hechar.”

With the poor people of the Earth,
I want to share my lot. But nobody thinks that any more.
Or if they do, they enter monastic orders.

“Mi verso es un ciervo herido,
Que busca en el monte amparo.”

My verses are like a wounded fawn,
But wounded or not, searching or not,
José Martí dead at 42 in a useless skirmish,
his poet’s blood shed,
while Guantanamo Bay prison, Martí’s Guantanamo, still is not closed down
and foreign soldiers and undesirables, unwanted on so many levels,
by this government and other governments,
waste in the shadows of the mountain
where the wounded fawn seeks its refuge.

(II)

José Julián Martí y Pérez
rocking in the cradle of a Cuban breeze,
361 years after *that* sailor
landed on this island, which he called Juana.
And thanks to the grace of His Holiness Pope Nicholas Vth,

Christopher, Cristóforo Colómba,
saw the land empty,
the tall, brown, human bodies on shore not being Christian,
the Doctrine of Discovery beginning,
no, continuing,
its wreckage of lands and bodies west and south,
ever west and south,
with long eastward swinging loops to reap
the rich harvest of Black and Brown bodies
in Mother Africa,
bringing them west, to labor and die.

José Martí, fifteen and sixteen years old,
writing of freedom and Cuban independence from Spain,
praising Lincoln's newly minted Emancipation Proclamation.

“Todo es hermoso y constante,
Todo es musica y razón,
Y todo como el diamante
Antes de luz es carbón,” he wrote.

Before the light,
everything, like the diamond,
is carbon.

What made you shine, José Martí?
What led from that cradle
to the bloody body at the crossroads,
to the rearing bronze stallion
at the 59th Street and 6th Avenue entrance to Central Park?

(III)

What I want to tell you
is that heroes shine in the night sky
like stars whose light
takes hundreds or thousands of years
to reach Earth.

Like stars in the sky,
the light of those who have gone before
is (a snapshot) an image of the past.

The light is real,
but the context has changed.
Through the waging of wars,
conquest of lands, people,
agrarian, rural,
exploitive, vanquished,
each people who occupy a space
call it their own,
or not,

based on how they got there,
how they told their tale,
what stories they were told.
Dispossessed or conqueror,
or something else,
each holding a line that runs longer,
and deeper, than they see.

Martí is on that line,
a light, a moment flaring in the darkness
of changing hands of oppression
and hope.

How do we move forward?
What matters?
In the end,
now, later.

Simple Versos he called them.
Songs of beauty and peace,
children of a golden age
and a golden land,
as real,
no more, no less,
than Benedict Anderson's imagined communities.

Please

if we didn't dream,
where would we be
in a land, in lands, of immigration, emigration,
forced, and other?

Any child, for a moment,
knows the pristine view,
depending on circumstances.
Blake knew and wrote Songs of Innocence.

Martí hoped and wrote Versos Sencillos.

The dreamer, the poet,
blooded in battle,
fervent with an idea,
a hope of equality and
freedom (for all?)

I cannot judge.

None of us can.

Monuments rise and fall to changing times,
the hopes of a new wave of immigration
of thought on the horizon.

(IV)

The 525 years it takes for Hadar's light to reach the Earth
is the span of time between Columbus landing on Cuba and 2017.

The 15 years that Martí lived in New York City,
the second city he loved,
in exile from a Cuba he loved,
seeing the light of his far off island star,
possibly fathering a daughter with his landlady,
dreaming of freedom and revolution,
did he walk through the new Central Park?
Walk past the space where Seneca Village, built by
free Black women and men had been razed to make way
for the rich to have a green view from
their luxury homes?
Did he pass the spot where a century later, more or less,
a bigger than life-sized bronze statue of him on horseback
would be raised, the installation delayed
by the political inconvenience of Castro's revolution
and the Bay of Pigs fiasco?

Castro, self-identified as inspired by José Martí,
hiding in the mountains of Cuba,
prior to his win, prior to his reign,
leading a scruffy band of rebels intent on...what?
Capturing the moment? Freeing the people
from Mafia and US government and corporation riddled
melange of parties?
What would Martí have thought?

My uncle Bebo, Luben, Jr.,
my mother's only and older brother,
was a supporter.

The day Castro made his first radio broadcast
at the very start of his half-century reign,
Bebo turned in disgust from the radio,
"He's a communist," he said, and walked out,
walked away, so the family story goes,
living long enough to have my mother, his baby sister,
liberate him and his family to New York City twelve years later,
so that he could die, silent and angry,
on Long Island in 2006.

A childhood friend,
part of that hopeful band of early supporters,
disappeared, shortly after that entrance into Havana,
never to be seen or heard from, again.

On the north side of the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana
is a massive statue of Jose Martí, a national hero.

On 59th Street and 6th avenue in New York City
is a massive statue of Jose Martí, the hero of the people.

Throughout Latin America, there are statues of Jose Martí.

Like starlight that set out on its journey hundreds of years ago,
we see the light
and interpret it by our location, our time.

What would Martí have thought,
his statue in Havana rising high above the plaza
where kerchief-clad children lay flowers at his feet
on victorious holidays,
the champion of the people
open for business
to anyone who can
raise a heroic statue
above the masses.

(V)

Jose Martí, earnest by all accounts,
romantic in language,
contemporary to Walt Whitman,
hungering for an ideal of people's common humanity
at the right place,
at the right, or wrong, time,
not the bloody crossroads
but the historical moment,
both in his life and after,
played his part.

Heroes are made, born,
Conjured retroactively by the imaginations of those
who can use them.

And, still, José Martí, poet's heart and fervent soul,
writing his verses of the soul before he died,
prescient, maybe,
on his bronze horse and raised sword,
looks down the Avenue of the Americas from 59th Street,
shrouded in tales, histories, the imagination of one little
girl, and the hopes of millions.

[“Yo venga de todas partes,

Y hacia todas partes voy...

En las montes, monte soy.”

I am a traveller to all parts...

With the mountains I am one.]