Sip a mojito in the bar across from the customs house and remember Federico García Lorca. His culture was in his veins. He saw though doctrine, let surprise open into desire, sought the spark beneath the obvious, found his own symbols to make the world new.

Verde que te quiero verde!
Trees begin to sway, dance halls fill, the chapel does a cha cha cha. Ladies’ fans open with musk, lemon drifts from the black capes of their suitors.

Lorca sat in this tavern once, calling up the smooth-grained labia of calla lilies carved around La Dolorosa on her altar — how they roused the Duende from his blood, how the lacquered fish became a compass of light around her face.

He divided the glare of the sea through the saloon-door slats into stanzas, one for each river of a street he walked to meet the luminous boats in the harbor, the carnal tide, aroma of struggle, quick whisper of sorrow.
HASTA GUANABACOA

In sifting rain we board the ferry
behind a lady whose dress is all pockets: blue candles,
zinc amulets, pink gladiolas.

Across the bay, a chapel sits like a tavern
entombed with incense, rum, votive wax.
When I climb the steps and bow to the dark saint
in her alcove of honey and white sails, doves burst
into a wine-colored fan.

Here nobody is more than anybody else.
The bride purifying herself on the kneeler
wears see-through lace. A man bent like a weathervane
creates a breeze with his supplication. A niña
half-hidden in her mother’s folds gives me her eyes,
and with them her poverty.

Back on the sea, my head turns in circles, triumphs
with doubt, holds close these moments
where one soul becomes another
and a new self embarks.
FERNANDO, TOBACCO FARMER

*Gracias por su ayuda,* he said, leaning into me from his perch on the arm of my wooden rocker—well, his rocker—after all, we were on his front porch among *mogotes* and fields of tobacco. He appeared on the trail we walked which turned out to be his back yard, his farm, and invited us to his house, just like that.

Campesino Fernando with his blazing blue eyes and tattered plaid shirt, his crooked smile. He made piña coladas with and without rum, frothy and delicious—I took mine with—then sat beside me and plunked two stacks of dried leaves into my lap, telling us all (by then others had gathered) how tobacco is grown, cutting it into three long splices, removing the central vein, rolling it into one perfect cigar.

Then looking down at my thighs overflowing with his leaves he laughed and lit the cigar, passing it to me and my lips. I felt like I could walk into that life, wake up in his simple whitewashed house, call it home.
THE CUBAN WORD BRIGADE

Byzantine light off the guitar-shaped bay
through tall colonial doors of a workshop
where ladies of the Word Brigade stitch poems
between rough-cut covers of one-of-a-kind books.

Musicality to their effort.
A chiming sparkle to each hand-sewn verse.
Red iron-oxide brushed on mothwing parchment
dusted with crushed seashell. Fish scales gleaming
from freshly-glued spines of Neruda and Mistral.

Under cover, beyond headlines
above the chain of command, these women
hands to the task, bring light from the word.

Into the night they print, sew, collate and bind
until the fluttering lamplight dims, the sun rises
over the rusted drawbridge, the bicycle vendor
warms his hands around a too-thin baguette
and the moored city awakens.
SWIMMING CUBA

a woman’s distorted reflection
in the bevelled glass door

photos of young revolutionaries
in black and white

a whole park for John Lennon

a Bucanero followed by a dark pull
of coffee at the peso bar

thunder on Mori’s back patio
and the long bunch of bananas slowly ripening

21 bridges over the Ríos Yumurí and San Juan
more thunder, such a pouring-down

I was looking outside myself, then in,
thinking these might be signs for the road ahead—

Beyond the tepid air of sea
the endless honking
a waitress holding a tray above her head
for an umbrella
birdsong behind diesel crank
her brown legs
his white hat
how we were "his first Americans"

I feel a different rhythm now—
like backstroking in a wide sea
without the measure of a pool’s rope—

how profound it actually is to be happy.