

TO ALL CUBAN POLITICAL PRISONERS, PAST AND PRESENT

I'm not sure how to write a heading for a letter meant for everyone to read but addressed to you, the men who have broken the molds of time, because you have lived without time, without clothing, and, occasionally, without food for several weeks. How many times have you not had enough space to stretch your limbs or even a place to rest your heads?

One might even say that you had no one in this world, because your mothers, wives, daughters, and girlfriends have quite simply been so extraordinary that they can't be associated with this world. I'm speaking of those women who, from the other side of the bars and with unfathomable devotion, have joined you in taking a leading role in this heroic feat.

This letter is also addressed to those women who have been political prisoners in Cuba, though I hardly have the audacity to say so, because words are not enough to express your heroism and your boundless love for our Nation. You are like flowers, sown in darkness and deprived of water, covered in mud and trampled by cowardly boots day in and day out, which never lost their fragrance or elegance. You put those men who are driven by their instinct of self-preservation to shame.

You, those who have been forgotten by everyone. You, those whose existence no one knew about or, if someone did know, they preferred to remain silent. You, the lost causes, those who have been written off by everyone, those with no practical meaning, like the poor in the Beatitudes. Because of you, the poet's warning did not become a prophecy that would be fulfilled.

Crushed, your bodies half rotten, with no right to anything, often not even sunlight, you were the guardians of our national dignity.

You were left with nothing in this world, so you are men without a world. There you were, an upsetting presence, planted face-to-face with an immense power, powerless against those who treated you with unabashed cruelty, you never wavered, standing firm.

Though you stand firm, your roots don't dig deep, instead stretching up to the heavens. There, where your tormentors couldn't find them when they tried to cut them down. They dug up the earth, they uprooted the flowers, they poisoned the water, but there was a problem: your tormentors didn't know how to lift their heads and look up, way up, even further still, beyond their monuments to death, beyond where they place the border with nothingness, which is the afterlife of the philosophers and the tormentors, and perhaps the reason why even those philosophers are also tormentors.

Yet where they saw nothing is a kingdom of love and of life, the source of your courage. Many of you crossed that frontier with great peace in your souls, smiling when you saw the bewilderment of not only your tormentors but also of those who considered themselves experts in that kingdom that is not of this world.

With time, everyone forgot you, even the fussy poets who seethe over injustices committed in faraway lands, even the cautious saints who left you out of their public prayers. But you, all by yourselves, persisted, weak and lost in reproach and insignificance, because someone had crossed barbed-wire fences and scaled walls to walk among you. He entered your cells one day and planted himself with you. He had warned, "Whatever you do to the least of my brothers, you do unto me."

Since then, nothing and no one could subjugate you. As we know now, it was He who sustained you.

What a contrast! Out of those cells that not even daylight could penetrate emerged a shining ray of light that illuminated an entire generation and marked a path for the future. That future is now the present; we travel that path today.

Your greatest victories were that you never learned to hate and that each passing day filled you with more love and more peace.

Once again your tormentors took up the charge: they tried again, they tested new forms of cruelty, they bruised your bodies, they cut into your flesh, and they wrung out your sweat and blood and your loved ones' tears. They also tried isolating you, subjecting you to psychological torture, those other tortures. The men in power said, "Maybe they'll all go crazy," and, "When they get out—those who manage to get out—they won't be of any use." Many bodies perished, yet their owners were still standing tall, because they had stood their ground with their entire being, with their souls. We see Pedro Luis, our brother in faith, and many others among them. And those who were still alive no longer relied on their bodies, which posed quite the problem for those poor tormentors, because the manual of annihilation written by those who thought for them didn't say anything about man having a soul. That's when the philosophers, the men in power, and the tormentors lost the battle.

Meanwhile, outside your cells, it seemed like everyone was numb, sick. It seemed like the Nation had been lost, everyone had sold out, and the only option left was giving in. Could it be that the *Mambisa*¹ bloodline had been vanquished?

The earth shook. The Cuban flag was in danger of unraveling. What the poet had said: Was it a warning or a prophecy? Was there no one left living who would defend the flag?

Yes, the earth shook, because thousands of hands, their fists raised in combat, were emerging from the ground: indigenous hands, Black hands, white hands, *mestizo* hands, poor hands, rich hands, humble hands, the hands of workers and scholars, the hands of priests and poets, *Mambisa* hands. The hands of a nation that had already made history were all raised up in defense of the Cuban flag.

Then the hopeful, steadfast cry of the Nation could be heard: I still live with dignity in the hearts of those men and women who are kept away in dark cells. Heroes of all ages, halt! Lower your arms and rest in peace, for they raise the Cuban flag! No one will destroy us. I know not their names, but they say them, standing firm!

You and all who have sat in jail cells for serving the people and the Nation: you are a sign of dignity and you have saved the continuity of Cuba's spiritual heritage, especially those of you who have fallen while crying "Long Live Christ our King!" or "Long Live Free Cuba!" The world can't speak about them, but we can, we the people of Cuba who now harvest the fruits of their love. Yet they are still not at rest, because there are still men in prison. Their ranks are constantly replenished, for the Nation remains captive. Yet, something has changed: the example you have set has multiplied. Now, the entire nation of Cuba is going to stand firm. It will only move from its place to take a leading role in its liberation on a day not far from now, and you all will lead the way.

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Translated by Ashley Caja

¹ Translator's note: The term *Mambisa* refers to the rebel forces that fought for independence from Spain in the 19th century.