"To offer my heart" (A trans. of “Ofrecer mi corazón” by Nancy Alonso)

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To Offer My Heart

The thundering chords of the Ninth Symphony filled a room where the only tapestries were crowded shelves of books and where music mingled with the sound of waves slapping against the terrace. Marcelo Monteroni’s home was one of those large old houses in the Punta Gorda neighborhood of Cienfuegos that looked out on the bay. Now, Marcelo, in his old age, was sitting motionless in a wicker chair absorbing every note with the same degree of exuberance—perhaps even more—that he had experienced as a young man when he first discovered Beethoven. For him, music, along with reading, had always been a great passion. It was especially true now that he was nearly blind and depended on others to read him books that previously he’d been able to devour with his own eyes. In music Marcelo found a ready source of spirituality, a means of drawing near to the cosmic whole, and a refuge in which to calm sorrows. The Monteroni family could tell exactly how Marcelo felt by the music he selected. Bach’s harmony indicated peacefulness and rest, and days of rejoicing were augmented by Mozart. But when desperation and pain tormented him, Marcelo sought companionship and encouragement in Beethoven. That was how he was feeling now as he waited for Svieta, his older daughter, to return from Havana. She had gone there to accompany Patricia, the other Monteroni daughter.

Marcelo decided that as soon as Svieta returned and told them how everything had turned out he would ask her to read some portions of Juan Cristóbal, one of the books he kept by his bedside. No one could read as well as Svieta. Not even his wife, Monica, could match his daughter's empathy and sensibility. Svieta had a rare talent for being able to impart the exact intent of each sentence as she read, and she showed a special sensitivity with the novel. Juan Cristóbal, the novel's main character, was one of Marcelo's heroes and now had become a hero for Svieta, as well. Still, she was surprised to find that the book contained a sentence that seemed to provide a perfect description of the circumstances that surrounding its reading. It seemed almost like magic.

Marcelo loved his daughters equally, but identified less with Patricia. On the other hand, with Svieta there were no generational obstacles to communication—except in the realm of musical preference. Svieta was a fan of rock music, a choice far too boisterous for her father's taste. And lately she never lost the chance to listen to songs belted out by the popular Latin American rock singer Fito Páez. Between the heavy metal sound and the singer's accent, which made it seem like Spanish was not his mother tongue, Marcelo could barely understand the words. As far as Marcelo was concerned, if you were going to hear music and not understand the words, you might as well listen to Wagner's operas because at least you knew the plot.

One thing Marcelo really couldn't explain was why the two daughters were so different. The girls had been raised under the same roof and nourished with the same degree of earnest care. Both daughters were born in Montevideo, where their parents were from. And the parents, Marcelo and Monica, both hailed from Italian immigrant families that had settled in Uruguay. The Monteronis had moved to Cuba more than thirty years ago, forming part of the first solidarity groups that came to the island, with a determination to cast their lot with the Cuban people. At the time the family arrived in Cienfuegos, Patricia was barely walking and Svieta was already in
third grade. So it was curious that Patricia retained a distinctive Uruguayan accent, in sharp contrast to Svieta's Cuban-sounding speech, when it should have been just the opposite.

Leaning back in his comfortable armchair in the library, Marcelo could vividly recall the day that Svieta had interrupted him while he was listening to Vivaldi to announce that she was going to learn to speak like Cubans. It was right after they had arrived from Uruguay. Svieta's newfound friends seemed intrigued by her distinctive way of speaking and were constantly telling her: "Say something else." Some did so just to satisfy their curiosity; others delighted in hearing new sounds. And there were some, of course, who were cruel and made fun of the little girl from Uruguay, just because she was different from them. Svieta also stood out with her long blonde tresses, her short skirt, her socks worn up to the knees, her considerable knowledge acquired in a German school, her blue eyes, and her fair skin—much too white for a tropical climate. Marcelo felt a tug of tenderness when he remembered his little Svieta saying: "I want to be Cuban and I'm going to dress like a Cuban, cut my hair and learn to speak in Cuban." And everything happened just as she'd announced. The only thing she was never able to learn was to say "detrás de mí" (behind me) in Cuban fashion instead of "detrás mío," the Uruguayan way. But except for that no one would have been able to claim that she wasn't a homegrown Cuban.

The record with the Ninth Symphony finished, but Marcelo didn't feel like calling Monica and asking her to play it again. He made do with hearing the sound of the sea, just as he'd resigned himself to so many other things: the darkness that had rendered him useless, the presumptuous attitude of his daughter, and her reproach of the decision to abandon his homeland, his friends, and his comfortable life to pursue an ideal in a distant place. Patricia had decided at age eighteen that she would take on airs and change the way she spoke, and not all the family powers of persuasion could convince her that the artificial pose didn't work. Patricia, who was in reality a Cuban born in Uruguay, wanted to seem foreign, while Svieta, a Uruguayan by all accounts, had fought to be Cuban at any cost.

Monica appeared from the terrace and looked at her husband in silence. But Marcelo, with that sixth sense that comes when the loss of one faculty strengthens another, could sense that Monica was near and said:

"Please, I'd like to listen to the symphony one more time." Then he added: "Will Svieta be back soon?"

"She should be arriving any moment," replied Monica as she complied with Marcelo's request, and the passion of Beethoven once again overpowered the room.

Marcelo extended his arm in the direction where he knew Monica would be; she understood his gesture and drew near. Then she took his hand in hers. It was an attempt to give him fortitude that he dearly needed and that she scarcely had for herself, in those difficult times. When you share your suffering with your loved ones, the pain is multiplied. Each one suffers his or her part, as well as that of the others.

"How do you think Patricia will fare?" Marcelo said in a whisper.
"Everything will turn out fine. You'll see," Monica ventured, summoning what conviction she could.

"It's just that she's so immature. If she were Svieta we wouldn't have to worry. I'm right, aren't I? Svieta's always been able to think things through and act responsibly. Remember how she handled the problem with the two names when she was just a little girl."

The parents thought back to the time of the name dilemma. Marcelo had always wanted to give his first daughter the name Svieta but had run up against the Uruguayan prohibition against giving children foreign names—much less one that was Russian. All the pleas of the parents were in vain and they had to choose another name, finally settling on Julieta because Julieta and Svieta sounded similar. At home she was always called Svieta even though the name was "unconstitutional." Marcelo's leftist tendencies and the persecution he and his family suffered because of it, along with the almost continuous changes of residence in search of security, made it advisable not to call attention to Svieta's name. And so it was that from early childhood on, Svieta learned that her family name was just for the family and close friends. To anyone else who asked who she was, she answered with complete naturalness: "My name is Julieta."

Svieta's early signs of maturity were also evident on the night that police agents burst into the Monteroni residence demanding to know Marcelo's whereabouts. Marcelo barely had time to escape over the patio wall. The agents thought nothing of waking up little Svieta to ask her where her father was, but she replied that she hadn't seen him in days, even though he had tucked her into bed only minutes before. In fact, father and daughter had been listening to the Nutcracker Suite together just before Svieta went to bed. From that night forward Svieta felt that she belonged to her father's clandestine world. She kept the family's planned trip to Cuba in strictest secrecy, just as her mother had requested.

Cuba at that time was a hope for Latin America's leftist dreamers, and the Monteronis were part of a group that got together to sing songs of the Revolutionary Movement. The group was made up of men and women willing to give their all for the cause of the Cuban "project." To a certain degree it seemed as if with Cuba they were betting on the future of Latin America.

"Our Patricia is so different, stirring things up and making such a commotion about her name; calling herself Patty and even signing official documents with a name she invented for herself," said Monica. But almost as soon as she said it Monica wanted to take back her words.

The last thing Monica wanted to do was to reopen family wounds. The parents had never understood Patricia's rejection of the name of her paternal grandmother and much less her choice of a gringa version. Neither could they understand Patricia's constant unwillingness to conform, nor her decision to say no to Cuban citizenship when the time came to choose. It was just the opposite of Svieta. Marcelo was in the library listening to Madame Butterfly when Patricia informed him categorically that she would not follow Julieta's footsteps in regard to citizenship because she hoped to return to Uruguay. When all was said and done it turned out best that way. Patricia made all the arrangements to travel to her birthplace without difficulty. Until that day none of the Monteronis had gone back to Uruguay. In spite of the longing, and although Cienfuegos would never be the city where childhood and adolescent memories were stored,
Marcelo and Monica felt sufficiently Cuban to burn their bridges and to stay in the land that had accepted them as its own. They had forgotten at what point they stopped saying "they" in reference to Cubans and started saying "we."

Now Marcelo and Monica heard a car stopping at the side of the house. It was Svieta. Monica felt Marcelo squeeze her hand and responded in the same way to let him know that she understood just how he felt at that moment.

Svieta entered the room. Without saying a word she hugged both parents with a single embrace. Marcelo was the first to speak.

"Did it go well?"

"No problems, father."

"Did she leave a message for us?" asked Marcelo.

Svieta understood completely her father's desire to know everything that had happened before Patricia left for Uruguay. She felt really sad that her old man, whom she dearly loved and admired, was suffering from more than just the irreparable loss. Nothing could take the place of Patricia, and it was unlikely that the parents had the health to endure a long period of separation.

"She told me that she loves you very much, that you should never doubt that, that I should take good care of you, and that she'll come here on vacation as soon as she gets established and has some money. She also said not to worry about her." That was all that Svieta said, leaving out the part about Patricia's tears and the fear that Svieta saw in her sister's eyes as they said good-bye to each other at the airport in Havana.

The Ninth Symphony filled the silence as the three sat submerged in their thoughts. Each one in a distinct way thought about what they had done that had failed Patricia and distanced her from the family. Marcelo felt responsible for having been too rigid in his ideas and for being too intolerant of viewpoints other than his own. Monica regretted not having done more to draw Patricia and Marcelo together. How could she have helped them realize that they loved each other in spite of all the differences that separated them? Svieta was convinced that her excessive perfectionism had somehow estranged her sister. There was nothing that Patricia could do well that Svieta had not already done better-except for being different.

Svieta decided to change the topic, distract her parents, and help them put the bitter thoughts at a distance.

"Oh yes, and in Havana they gave me a package of medicine that's for you. It's from a friend who just returned from Uruguay last week-part of a donation from a Solidarity with Cuba group to be given to someone who needs it. She thought of you."

"Please be sure to thank her on our behalf," Marcelo replied.
"And it would be good to get the address of the Uruguayans to be able to write them," added Monica.

They listened until the record ended. Then Marcelo asked Svieta: "Shall we read some of Juan Cristóbal?" He used the plural "we" so as not to be left out of an experience that was almost sacred for him.

"Of course, Father," said Svieta as she went to look for the novel on one of the bookshelves.
"What part should we read?"

"Anything. Whatever appears when you open the book."

Svieta let the pages fall open. The emotion of the moment almost kept her from seeing the paragraph that appeared before her eyes. But she pulled herself together and began to read:

"He didn't realize that a great soul is never alone. Though chance might deprive him of friends, he always ends up creating more friends. The love within him is sufficient to surround him from without. And in the very moment in which he feels most isolated he is richer in love than the world's most fortunate."

Marcelo interrupted Svieta. He knew his daughter well enough to know how difficult it would be for her to continue the reading.

"Why don't we listen to some music?"

"Beethoven?"

"No, I want to hear that song that you like so much, the one by the rock star I can barely understand who says that things are not lost."

"Who said that everything is lost?" Svieta began to sing the song.

"I come to offer you my heart," said Marcelo, completing the thought.

1Spanish translation of Jean Christophe, cycle of ten novels about the life of a musician by the French author Romain Rolland (1866-1944). Some consider the work a heroic biography and note its lofty idealism. Rolland also wrote a biography of Beethoven. Juan Cristóbal has been widely appreciated in Cuba for its humanistic message and continues to have appeal; a two-volume edition was published in Cuba in 2001. Fidel Castro has said that he read the ten volumes of the work while in prison.

2Fito Páez of Argentina is noted for his song "Yo vengo a ofrecer mi corazón" (I come to offer my heart).

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