

# CIENFUEGOS

*stories*

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Deal

(BrownpaperpublishinG)

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*for Nancy*



chris deal



**CIENFUEGOS**

## cienfuegos

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In the year of one hundred fires,  
we were culled. The sun turned to  
the evil eye of God and the land  
became the devil's home.  
Everything tasted of smoke. Eyes  
became glass. Sacerdote marked  
and sent us to our lives,  
whispering in a dead tongue, 'To  
ash, to ash,' perhaps knowing  
those he would soon pray over.  
We threw our dead into the fires.  
Days turned, the land was clean.

## CHRISTMAS EVE

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On the road by nine, the interstate empty, nothing but snow, damn near black. Coffee in Statesville. Breakfast in Fancy Gap. Hit the Blue Ridge and flip a coin for direction. Heads say South, back into Carolina. Not a soul in sight, I drive, and drive, finding the highest point, sometime after five. Night creeps in like a ghoul. At the overlook, I climb the protective fence, and standing above a murderous fall, I consider a step. After some time I return home, things the same, but quiet.

## angels

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When he was young, Sherman saw angels. They were all around the islands that de Gama found hundreds of years back. Every hungry dog had one following close behind. Too, so did every old man who drunkenly wandered the dirty roads with no teeth and dust molded into his face like death masks. Sherman followed the angels around, sometimes all day. He never told anyone about them. They grew to be mundane. If you see the beauty every day, it stops affecting you. They became regular people, and Sherman grew to be an old man, an angel to his side.

## A MURDER BALLAD

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They were mestizo, darker than the other landowners, hated by the village. Arturo's father, a rich Spaniard, left his father the hacienda when he died. He hired a man named Ramon to run the land. His son was in the farmhouse one day and came across a bloody ax. Arturo told the boy, there is always some killing to be done on the farm. The police came for Arturo, and in the field they found many bodies of mestizo who had worked the land. Ramon married Arturo's wife, and one day, there was blood on the ax.

## keep me

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There is a letter on the pillow  
when she wakes to a cold bed.  
Folded and hand written, it reads:  
I'm out of breath, feels like I've  
run for miles. There's this train  
and I need to catch up. The sun  
will be up soon and I'll be gone.  
I'm tied to you and have to cut  
the string. Keep me in your heart,  
please, but find someone better. I  
have to drive, to go until I can't  
any further.

I hope one day you'll think of me  
and smile.

And she did, one day. She did.

## ICE

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Tracked him from Iqaluit, northwest to Arctic Bay. Found his scent in Grise Ford. There you notice strangers. Saul was three days ahead. He went northeast. A week later I was under the Cordilleras. My breath came out damn near solid. Walked two days towards the hint of smoke, and coming down onto the ice, I saw him. He waited and didn't fight the blade. The only warmth from his blood. David, he said. I laid a hand to his heart, and then the flames came over him, melting through the ice, and the sea took him. I went home.

## fan fiction

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He read a poem once, and it being a well-written poem, the boy was moved. Now, considering his youth, such things as being moved by a poem happen on a regular basis, but he thought it best to reenact the poem. He got on a bus, and he rode that bus into the Carolina mountains. The bus smelled of piss and he was sure there was blood on the floor. Soon, the bus stopped at a little cafe. He got a seat at the counter and hoped for a sublime experience. He got food poisoning and cursed the poet.

## ANGEL

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The roar of the train three blocks from their house, the one his mother bought with his father's insurance, woke Miguel that night. Padre nuestro, he started, que estás en los cielos, santificado sea tu Nombre. Hágase tu voluntad, en la tierra como en el cielo, en el cielo, en el- MIERDA, he yelled, realizing that his bed was wet. The train was still coming, with it the ángel who took his father to los cielos, up into el norte, the ángel taking all those souls whose time it came to be. He prayed, prayed the ángel away.

## across the river

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They dragged us, mangy and stinking, infected with lice and hooked on the injections, from one battle to the next, up and down these United States. Florida up through the Carolinas, we fought the enemy where we met them, cannon and rifle and saber. Saw my best friends dead and rotting, faces death masks of mud. Last fight, a buddy was hit by a cannonball. Took his legs from beneath him. He asked me to sing him hymns. Didn't know any. Never did find his boots. Someone else took them before I could get there.

## COYOTES

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El Norte was all Elieis knew. His parents paid a man to bring them across the border when he was a baby. Until the exile he lived his life whole in El Norte. He became stranger, a tourist in the land of his birth. He saved for months to pay the coyote. The trailer he climbed into was crowded, stifling. The coyote stopped the truck two miles from El Norte, unhooked the trailer, and left, the money in his pocket. Elieis never got home. No one did.

## home

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It was Christmas, and she was with me to meet the family, to see if she would want to make this her home. I took her around in the snow ending up on Neck Road. The trailer I grew up in long since burned. Further down it's just cornfields, and a cemetery from the Civil War. We walked the perimeter and the fields surrounding were like clouds, save a blight. It steamed in the cold. Lying like a corpse, the great cross, burned to a hellish black. That was our last Christmas together.

## GNOSIS

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He started that evening with a self-congratulatory shot of mezcal, for no right reason, followed by an imperial stout and his bourbon neat. He noticed the glow once he asked for an echo. His inhalation took on the relief of a sacred reality. 'Sláinte.' His smile was manifest. 'L'Chayim,' and creation was receding. The girl to his left, half his age, was watching him from behind phosphorescent halos. 'Salut,' and the spirits were gone. 'To joy and solitude,' he said, and he was alone, and that was good.

## picture

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I coughed a couple times, smoker's lung being what it is. She didn't mind. I wore my best suit, a thrift store number I bought for an interview some years back. Were I a churchgoer, you could say it was my Sunday best. She was smiling at me when she asked if I'd take a picture with her. She gave me a copy and I bought a frame for it. She saw the frame the first time she came home with me, clicked her tongue, and got me a better one. I always smile when I see it.

## JUAREZ

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The dump is where she ends up. Not a formal dump, where generation after generation has dismissed their refuse and more come for what can be salvaged from the detritus. La Policía called it the dump, where they found her. They'd lost count of all the others left there, in the center of town, across from the busiest grocery store around, three blocks from City Hall. Laying there, legs spread, things removed, blood covering her but not the ground. Dumped. Not even sixteen. No Quinceañera for her, one joked, automatic, necessary in the moment.

The Englishman came to our village five years after the government left. He went to the men and the boys, and he gave them food for their women, and then he gave them money, and then he brought guns and he gave them to men with the promise of more food and money. The men with their guns were his. The Englishman, wearing a suit even in the desert heat, took these men and they went to the next village, and the next, and then all was his, his will was law. Bloodless at first, the killing came next.

## EX NIHILO NIHIL FIT

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The magician snapped his fingers and a bunny appeared from nowhere. This is of interest, of course, because the bunny had to come from somewhere. Bunnies don't appear from the ether, they would have discussed that in school at some point, most likely physics. Of course, it could be the bunny was always there, and we just didn't see it until the magician's fingers snapped. Smoke and mirrors, that sort. Still, the possibility was there that the bunny did appear from nowhere at the snapping of the magician's fingers. Were that the case, he's a hell of a sorcerer.

## after the flood

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We stayed in the trailer for the duration of the deluge. Irv said it would be forty days and nights. It was six. The power went out on day one, as did the water. Irv hadn't showered for a week before hand. I'd open the window every once in a while, for the smell, but that would just lead to wet feet. I taught Irv chess, and after four games he was better than me. When it stopped raining, Irv asked, 'Where'd we end up?'

'Sheboygan, I think.'

'New record.'

'Let's try for Mexico next time.'

## DIAS DE LOS MUERTOS

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The gringos started flooding down over the border, around the time los muertos started coming up from their graves. I had to kill my brother two weeks after we put him down there. Apparently things are worse in el Norte. Gangs of them, crawling through the streets, rotting, foul hordes, killing anyone they see. We've got men with guns, narcos, always at the graveyards, putting down any who come up. We just have to worry about those damn gringos these days.

## round about three

---

The dry heaves came early, round about three, and they left me curled over the toilet, coughing up bile and spittle and blood, a psychedelic lightshow going off behind my eyes, the red of a freshly killed cardinal and yellow of the dying moon mixing against the holy white shit collector. Stomach was clawing at me like a foul and pissed-off beast. Went back to bed without flushing. Let's call it modernist art, the soon-to-be father said when he woke. We'll frame it and get millions. Fucker can still get a laugh out of me.

## ETERNAL RETURN

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There was rain and two bodies  
beneath the oblique sky, lips  
open and a live wire running  
through veins, and that day was  
like all that had come before,  
the earth below their feet  
spinning, every still moment  
alive with movement, around  
and around like a kid getting  
high on the equilibrium loss.  
No moment would ever be the  
same, always somewhere  
different in the verse, every  
moment lost, until the snap, the  
return to the before, then the  
expansion, and there it is again,  
those two bodies, the very same  
rain, the return.

## airport

---

He left her at the security check, and once through he looked back, and there she was, still there, waving, a smile that even from such a distance looks off, false, a mirror of his. He is so quiet in the bustle and the chaos surrounding him. He doesn't want to cry. He doesn't want to do anything but do away with the distance growing between them. He would destroy his life at the other end of the ride if only he could.

## SOME DISTANCE UP

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Reading Ulysses as if it were a map of the clouds, and with every look through the glass, imagining the free fall, the absolute joy that would come with the moment of isolation in such an ethereal cocoon, the filament freezing in my lungs, the rush towards the end so prematurely finishing our fun, the world's and mine. Of course, these illusions, along with the formerly forbidden words of the Irish idle and the fine Scottish whiskey, in all with the miles and every small revolution, cannot hide from mind what they serve to separate, or more correctly, the who.

## in flight

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Off by the horizon the clouds rise at the edge of madness like mountains obscuring a truth kept hidden since before the chimps took over this clump of dirt, where there were much bigger fish with much bigger teeth in this cliched little pond, stirring up winds that should remain dormant, and as those clouds become harder to see, shrinking in camouflage against this humanity's descent, the tears of loss are finally dry.

## NIGHT

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From the stupor of sleep I awoke, staring into the black nothing above. It was an complete absence, of light, of everything, an abyss like the dead of space, like if Heaven is the glory of the presence of God, then Hell is the annihilation of being, a disconnect, like the nothing before Creation. Rising to my heart was a heavy blanket of fear. Beyond the dark there was something coming forth, and if it was God, then I grew to fear Him.

## a sort of transition

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Let's say it starts with the feeling of your heart being ripped from your chest. This pain will flow through your being like cooling wax, slowing and congealing as it reaches your extremities. Your arms, legs, it's like they are on fire, and your stomach contorts with a ravenous, primeval hunger that brings tears to your darkening eyes. Your mind is the last to go, submerged in that natural state, where it's just the hunger to drive you, and the hunt, and the transition is complete, and you're not you, but something better.

## **NAME**

---

In the midst of holiday and familial celebrations, the old man with a toothy grin behind his beard, like clouds before the torrent, turned and said, 'You're the last of the name. It,' he laughed, 'dies with you,' and he continued, reciting the litany of those amongst us with no male descendants. If there is no seed planted before the harvest then could there not be such a thing as sheol for me. If hell is other people, then what is heaven?

## a closer examination of the scene

---

The mountain wind coming down from the heavens like razors to cut away the fat of the soul, tears frozen on cheeks, each a painful diamond, more valuable for the lesson earned, each foot an inch from stepping into the abyss of an action that cannot be taken back, and he stands, in the wind, the cold of damnation, of finality, and he is so close, just a step and this is all over, but he relents, and comes down from that height, and he breathes, and walks away, but remains, in every moment to come, there.

## I AM WHAT IVE DONE

---

He feels it, shame, remorse, and a sickness that hits whenever he thinks of her, bloody on the ground, more a ragdoll than a person, more refuse than mother to his daughter, but as he rides towards the federal lockup, the only fear he has is about how he'll be perceived; he's told the Aryans don't take kindly to his crimes, so he doesn't expect to last long.

## concerning a dream

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She had a dream one night that she was sitting in a park, the breeze was soft and there was the sound of children playing, but the sky grew dark and the wind blew in with the smell of rot and shit, and from a chasm up jumped the devil and he was tall and lean with knees that bent the wrong way, moving like a marionette, and his was the crooked smile of the boy in her heart and when he flashed it her way she feared she would sign whatever paper he put before her.

## AND YOU'LL NEVER SEE HEAVEN OR HOME

---

Day after day in a city so beautiful, because you can only see it from forty-four floors above the sprawl, the buildings like artifacts left by long dead giants, you think of the days before you left, and the girl who looked at you with eyes pure with rejection, and then comes the flood of drink, and one day you will lift your hand to your lips, and you will not be sure whether it's a bottle or a gun that you hold.

## border fires

---

Riding hard, you come up along the ridge and down into the valley, the moon high up in it's orbit as you come quickly to a stop, so close to the border you've promised yourself, and her, that you would never cross, you can see it, and you have given in and you have slipped but the border fires have only singed your flesh, with just the hint of a blister to show, and you keep thinking of how close you can get without breaking that promise and you have never been more disappointed in yourself.

## ALLUSIONS

---

came down the stairs and the wind was howling like the heavens were under fire and she whispered, the wolf may lose his skin but not his vices, and from the stairs she came to where I lay my head and for the moment that was home, descending she was like an angel, her lips ethereal and that first moment beginning so long before this verse was written, between gods, in the valley of a sudden spark and the outward expansion of a breath and the contraction of a false finale, We return always to that moment when she

## exodus

---

The man goes stumbling along  
filth strewn streets and dung  
ridden fields, from bar to pub to  
wherever a hardworking man can  
get a drink on a nice sunny day or  
on a monstrously murky  
midnight, wherever he may go,  
wandering and slumming and  
singing aloud, his voice carrying  
to every nook of this dark earth,  
'Let me go,' he asks of his  
entourage, his minions, 'let me  
go,' and they hear and they heed  
and they leave him be, settling in  
his wake wherever that may be.

## THE POINT

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There are simple profound moments that are the complete culmination of everything before in the verse and perhaps these moments will reverberate in all that will come in the silence of atrophy every bond broken until there is but the singular atom and that will be all the point where everything fell apart, where you will look back as an old man skin like paper with every sin written across your face and everything in your nature bringing you back to that one moment and your utter failure and that will be the point.

## plainsong

---

The petulant proselytes procreate with the prostitutes privately in the park, pouncing with pilfered prophylactics where peculiar plebeians propose to proctor prostate perlustrations in a pursuit to proffer a panacea for the population's pickled peckers, and post hoc they pray for penitence per their peccaminous practice to pacify the polyrhythmic palpitations, pelted though their proscenium personages may properly be, the principle of the perfidious perspicacity they peruse when privy to particular placid pauses punctuated by pachydermic pulses preemptive in their pudency, profoundly permuting the phantasmic panorama permitted by providence while patient progeny pensively pine for pleasures of phantasy.

## CATARACT

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The world around was the same as it ever was, then there came a particular turn in the wind and the sky was a shade never seen on this rock, the clouds pulsing and shifting, black as the dead of space, with violent undercurrents threatening to erupt the evening sky above my childhood home, like the apocalyptic ravings of a mad prophet and then there came a fury and the currents of clouds became a vortex bright as the sun a swirling of fire high above the ground and from that malevolent tourbillion came the roar of a dying god.

## cataclysm

---

There came a rupture in the sky  
and a wave of holocaust turned  
the air and the land to char and I  
could feel blistering and then it  
was gone, a trail in the air left by  
the conflagration and like any  
great storm it was only been the  
eye the ambience was ripped  
apart in a great searing flash and  
the very atoms of my being were  
torn away into the furor as I  
lifted a futile hand to protect  
myself and then there was  
nothing but the black expanse of  
eternity and the nothing was all.





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