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From the Guest Editor

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FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

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What happens when we can't go back where we're from? What happens to our memories of those places? What happens to the life we imagined in our future?

When we talk about immigration, we talk of movements, from south to north, from east to west, from here to there, from A to B. And we talk of opportunities, of a wish for better lives, of education and frequently of progress. Sometimes we also talk of return, of a homecoming after a life's work, of a rest at the end of the road in the comfort of family and familiar surroundings, of something as simple as a visit to our native land.

But the exile -- the dislocated, the refugee -- frequently has other reasons for moving from one place to another: war, persecution, civil unrest or personal danger. The exile can't go back home because she is explicitly banished and threatened with imprisonment, torture or death upon return. For the exile, whether asylum is formal or not, home is a memory ever more distant, home is a mirage.

For some exiles, this kind of uprooting is a blessing: a chance at a new life, much like that of the traditional immigrant. For others, it's a blessing still, but because there is a life at all. And for others, exile is a temporary condition: a waiting period until they can be repatriated, vindicated perhaps, rescued certainly, returned to where they believe they belong: the home country, the native land, the hometown held static in the imagination and the heart. How to hold on to that idea over time? How to remember who we really are, and then who we were, so that we may go back someday?

And what happens if we can't return? If exile is endless? If the waiting becomes the entire time of our lives? How do we make a life where we don't want to be, where we are perpetual strangers? How do we compete with history -- by

revising it or blotting it out or holding onto it with a furious love? What is the story we tell about our condition?

And how is that story different when we look in the mirror, when we pray or long for what is out of our reach? What is the legacy passed down to our children?

And what if -- what if! -- a door opens and we pass through it, exile forgiven, and we find ourselves back exactly where we thought we wanted to be?

Exile and dislocation fascinate me because I come from a family that left our home country because we no longer felt safe there, choosing instead to wait out what has turned out to be an endless revolution in the United States. I come from Cuba, which is in many ways unique (not the least because of our exile without end, but also because of our

own peculiarly privileged place in American migratory policy), but the contemporary story of escape from danger, of banishment from our home could apply to people from Argentina, Chile, Bolivia and Uruguay during the era of dirty wars and dictatorship, to the countries of Central America during the many civil wars of the 80s, to Peru, to Colombia and Mexico during the drug wars, to the Dominican Republic during Trujillo, to Haiti during a series of

governments from Duvalier on, to Eastern Europe both before and after the Soviet collapse, to Ireland and Germany and to people from a myriad countries in Europe, Africa and Asia and all over the world. The Maldives, islands threatened with disappearance by rising waters caused by global warming, just recently exiled their president. The middle east between Europe and Africa on the long list of places where people are exiled from.

Exile is ever present in human history, from the Greek Wars to our present catastrophic state of displacement: According



Héctor Duarte, *untitled*, mixed technique on paper, 22 x 30 in., 1994

to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, there are 34 million dislocated people right now, as I write, awaiting some sort of decision on their lives, some sort of next step, some sort of help. Claims for asylum -- the ultimate certificate of you-can't-go-backness -- are up 17 percent from last year in industrialized countries.

Exile stories, dislocation stories, stories about being here instead of there, are classic stories, stories too big for one issue of any magazine or in one volume in an encyclopedia of a displacement, but here, in the volume you hold in your hands, we have a sampling of exilic experiences: the crazy Cuban in Cristina García's story, who holds on to his fury as fuel for living; Ariel Dorfman's earnest returning Chilean refugee, who discovers life in his home country has proceeded in unexpected ways that leave him marginalized; Reina María Rodríguez's futile attempts to help an exile come home and the way the world shrinks for her in the process; a young man's visit to his family's ancestral home in Eastern Europe and its echoes of familiarity, its dark and alien silences.

What happens when we can't go back where we came from, even if we want to? What happens when we're forever dislocated, even when we return? These are the questions I put to our writers. But don't look for answers here -- there are none. These stories and essays, poems and testimonies are here only to bear witness, to wrestle with the issues, to rephrase and chew on the questions, to give us a glimpse, and just that, a glimpse, of this human predicament.

Chicago, May 2012