

Interlude

"Life in the Woods"

*Esteban Montejo**

I have never forgotten the first time I tried to run away. That time I failed and spent a number of years enslaved by the fear they would put the shackles on me again. But I had the spirit of a cimarrón in me, and it didn't go away. I kept quiet about things so nobody could betray me because I was always thinking about escaping. It went round and round in my head and wouldn't leave me in peace. It was an idea that never left me and sometimes even sapped my energy. The old blacks were not kindly towards running away. The women even less so. Runaways, there weren't many. People were afraid of the woods. They said that if some slaves escaped, they would be caught anyway. But for me that idea went round in my head more than any other. I always had the fantasy that I would enjoy being in the forest. And I knew that working in the fields was like a living hell. You couldn't do anything on your own. Everything depended on the master's orders.

One day I began to watch the overseer. I had already been studying him. That dog got stuck in my eyes and I couldn't get him out. I think he was a Spaniard. I remember that he was tall and never took his hat off. All the blacks had respect for him because one of the whippings he gave could strip the skin off of just about anybody. The thing is, one day I was riled up, and I don't know what got into me, but I was mad, and just seeing him set me off.

I whistled at him from a distance, and he looked around and then turned his back. That's when I picked up a rock and threw it at his head. I know it hit him because he shouted for someone to grab me. But he never saw me again because that day I made it into the woods.

I traveled many days without any clear direction. I was sort of lost. I had never left the plantation. I walked uphill and downhill, all around. I know I got to a farm near Sigüanea, where I had no choice but to camp. My feet were full of blisters and my hands were swollen. I camped under a tree. I stayed there no more than four or five days. All I had to do was hear the first human voice close by, and I would take off fast. It would have been real shitty if you got caught right after escaping (...)

All my life I've liked the woods. But when slavery ended I stopped being a cimarrón. I found out about the end of slavery from all the people shouting, and I left the woods. They shouted, "We're free now." But I wasn't affected. To my mind, it was a lie. I don't know ... fact was that I went up to a mill, and without touching the boilers or the cans or anything, I stuck my head out little by little until I came out altogether in the open. That was when Martínez Campos¹ was governor because the slaves said he was the one who let them go free. Even so, many years passed in Cuba, and there were still slaves. It lasted longer than people believe.

When I came out of the woods I started walking, and I met an old woman with two children in her arms. I called to her from a distance, and when she came up to me I asked her: "Tell me, is it true that we're no longer slaves?" She answered me: "No, son, now we're really free." I kept walking the way I was headed, and started to look for work. Many blacks wanted to be friends of mine. And they asked me what I did as a cimarrón. And I told them: "Nothing." I've always liked independence. Sassy talk and idle gossip do no good. I went for years and years without talking to anyone.

Notes

1. Arsenio Martínez Campos, Captain General of the Island of Cuba. He was the head of the Spanish army in 1868 during the Ten Years' War. He remained in Cuba until 1878 when the end of the war was declared in the Zanjón Pact.

* In Miguel Barnet, *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, translated by W. Nick Hill (Ct: Curbstone Press, 1994), pp. 44-45, 56-57.