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## AJ FERGUSON por la noche

And to the west, the cane fields sprawl, a sea of perennial grass rising from the black corpse that was once a river. Come the dog days, farmers set fields ablaze for the harvest burn. As he inhales the smoky stench that's seeped into the city, he clenches his jaw, his eyes. Imagining the crunch of ash between each tooth, the undulation of black against a deepening twilight blue; a thin line of fire razes the horizon of his mind.

But his Florida is a midnight trudge alongside slouched toughs long past their season; each adorned with ill-fitting remnants still held dear: wilted scally caps; assault with intent; hard whiskey guts; jeans faded, frayed. They wander from avenue to alley to lane, trekking the line between La Petite Haiti and Little River; they who hail from places with different names that mean the same thing: Vecindades, Tivoli Gardens, Ghost Town, Asbury Park; a diaspora of delinquents—adrift—stomping through the ubiquity of urban sprawl. As shotgun shacks give way to shuttered storefronts, they scan for the hustlers, the crazies, yearning for familiar faces—echoes of home. Fattened by assimilation, this harshness, this scarcity, is comfort food: each of these things its own tautology, its own self-contained truth. Having emerged from an alley, they settle to drink, leaning on chrome and steel while a dance-hall throb grinds

its hips against the neighborhood's hush. They pause between swigs of Red Stripe—as warm as blood—to spit aggrandized narratives; these stories, loaded with Spanglish, larded with half-truths, provide a new mythology, evoked in private patois, *which surely*, only they can understand. Voices rise in the heat only to die out under the distant rim-fire crackle: the burner jams—they exhale—and Dawn Penn wails: no, no, no...

His Florida is a southbound sedan, Salsa blaring, belts screaming, and the needle buried just under where the dial reads 95. We just need to pick: up: more: speed. Lane changes dictated by rhythm alone—drifting east now west—concrete seams strike bald tires to keep a syncopated *son clave* beneath El Rey's timbale chatter: Ran Kan Kan... hands hasten to kill the radio upon reaching the Causeway's crest; the engine noise a lone rebuke to silence. The city slips by as their collective gaze probes the darkness just beyond the neon skyline. Out there, the Caribbean lurks as a vast certainty, farther out than what can be discerned through the night. Then the waiting tunnel, with brackish breath, consumes both light and sound—a muffled moment—before they're disgorged into the rolling riot of plastic and steel that crawls along Collins Avenue; they blink—as though having just plucked coins from their eyes. Alighting on broken pavement, they grip the counter of a coffee stand. While, indifferent to their fading swagger, the hedonistic glamour that is South Beach struts by. The repetition of a grumbled order yields an earnest glare over machine-steam hiss. A reminder: one waits for café con leche on Cuban time. They speak softer now, voices hoarse from laughter; a weary cough, five digits of a phone

number, then they're swallowed by the throng. Once sure the crew is gone, he extracts his last cigarette, lights it, and exhales through blackened fingers, pocked, powder-burn-raw. His gaze pried upward, wary of the faint light that now bleeds across the sky.

And to the east, the Atlantic lays a summer lake—producing tiny, sullen waves that grasp at the shore. While deep within the city grid, August's swelter settles in. As the street's traffic, an ersatz sigh, pushes him further out and into sleep: a constellation of pixilated hammerheads descends into the throbbing darkness beneath his eyes: a school of silhouettes trace circles within the sea of thermal noise just as they did before the test patterns appeared.