Cuba's young poets, who meet on a Havana rooftop, are finding a common voice in a state that nurtures its young until they start making demands, ELIZABETH WANLY traces a quiet revolution on society's margins. Pictures by JUAN CARLOS ALOM

Revolutionary fight for poetic licence

ning at dusk a group of young poets gather to talk and work in the living room of a small house built on top of a flat roof in Havana. From here you can see much of the broken filigree of what may still be the oftest city in the world

Hayana was made for plea sure, but from here you can see the food lines that criss-cross the neighbourhood, as hunger becomes real on the island and the revolution wrestles with its claims of "socialist legality". Ordinarily at dusk everybody in Havana reaches out for one another, and these days the chatter and romancing still continue. But it's becoming aimless; that offensecoppes which is en-Cuban now verges on hysteria One of the young poets on the roof turns from the scene below. "If at this juncture," he says,
"we don't try to find out what it really means to be Cuban, we're

It was another poet who brought this group together It's the white-washed rooftop cottage, the one that she and her lover managed to build for themselves on the Havana skyline that all of them now call home. It's become a bit of a legend in the city

Reina Maria Rodriguez is hardly well-known outside the island, though some perceive her as "a key figure in the emerging post-Soviet Cubi After nearly 25 years in which much important Cuban writing has occurred in exile: Reina Maria Rodriguez and the young poets gathered on her rooftop may finally be turning that around Several of the emur have won prizes in Spain and Mexico. And now, what is arguably the most authentic literary movement seen on the island in decades may be on the verge of becoming the first legally-recog nised autonomous cultural association to exist since the 1959 revolution. If that status is granted, a small publishing imprint will be included within its mandate. Reina will have bro

ken the state's monopoly on Cuban literary life. Whatever happens, the young who have pushed the state thus far. For the last 15 years or so. Cuba's restless youth have annoyed the hardliners. And clearly the work of those who meet together at Reina's illustrates the limits of the political messianism of the past. One



Three amigos . . . Almelio Fornaris, Sanchez Mejias and Antonio Ponte, who says: The task this generation has set for itself is to try to pin down an island born out of so much imagination

tries to shake itself free of poli-"This new literary generation looks to Jose Lezama Lima as their spiritual father. One of Latin America's literary giants, Lezama was Cuba's most cnigmatic writer, the island's James Jovce. He died in 1976, scorned by the revolution for his politimad somersaults. cal apathy as well as for his Another particulant in the homosexuality.

According to Antonio Ponte aged 30, "the task this generation has set for itself is to try to

modern style. His work is full of | preoccupied with loneliness. Wittgenstein "Perhaps we are not able to see God because we can't see the light with which we see" he writes Almelio Calderon Fornaris, 28, is here too, a librarian and science fiction fanatic whose poetry is full of

aged 31, a rather lordly exsecondary school reacher. One of the most privileged of the

more apocalyptic or more hope ful than Reina. And, in spite of herself: she's become a celebrity not only on the island but throughout much of Latin rica and Europe. Her poems have been translated into six languages and published in

over a dozen countries. t rom Rema's roof you can always hear the sound of drums. There's so much drumming in Cuba. drumming itself

cerned with memory than popu lar culture," says Sanchez Meias. "As a people, we Cubans have had little respect for memory - or history. It seems we might have something to gain from developing that, no? The language that the young

rarely existed in Cuba, "even before the "cyclution". He refers to "a 'minking language' where poetry moets philosophy especially me aphysics - in the

Yet despite the constant of po- | precedented period of self-cenlitical repression in Cuba, the revolution wasn't always so suspicious of its poets and their poetry. "Even with all their ideological skirmishes the sixties in Cuba were a cultural Golden Age," says Omar Perez

sorship from which Cuba has

Virgilio Piñera and José Le

zama Lima tried to go on as

in Cuba during their lifetime

hype," says Omar Perez,

yet to recover. During the 1970s,

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of cither writer was published

The 1980s were to be a return to the 1960s — that was the

Everyone was supposed to be

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Reina is less cynical. "During

'All the greats were being pub-Ushed: Lezama. Alejo Carpentier, Virgilio Pinera, Reinaldo In that era "the magazine of

the Casa de las Americas (a pan

brought out the deep contradic tions of the revolution," says Omar Percy. "The powers-thatbe in Cuba do love talent. they're even obsessed by it. says a poet who prefers to remain anonymous "The ineti tutions of the regime have done a great deal to foster it. They nurture the young - until of course the young out-grow the space the revolution intended them to have. They start making demands; those demands are read as political: then the

trouble starts. It's hannened here over and over. Why did the state ever allow Reina's group to become so strong? "It couldn't have hanpened in the seventies," says one of the young poets. "By the rime the revolution swang conconvariue again in the late 1980c Reina's reputation was

international." For a long time, says a young painter, "the powers that be underestimated the independence of her will. She was con sidered a charming eccentric. good PR for the revolution's tol erance." Besides, says another poet, "the revolution has often shown itself to be quite aspute in not harming those they regard as safety valves."

And in trying to contain the chaos of the 1990s, the state has moved carefully - not to inname, but to contain. What sort of future would these poets chose for them-selves? "It's hard to say," says Antonio Ponte, "Ideas are changing too quickly." One of the group, long silent, speaks "The revolution wasn't just repression," he said. "Under Pidel, those in the countryside became people instead of

He pauses. "We all fought to be Che Guevara when we played together as children. Yet the asceticism of Ché and the Party attacked the grace at the very heart of Cuba, especially the Cuba of the cities. What makes it all the sadder is that hat grace had been available to a substantial proportion of the population." Still, the work of the majority of these young poets is full of a quiet romance with the ideals of the revolution mid-1960s style. This feeling that something was cut short, unre alised, may well haunt Cuba in

the future And as always, Miami looms n the horizon. One poet refers to the two groups - Cubans on the island and those in extle as "two sets of lab rats, engaged

noyed the hardliners. And clearly the work of those who meet together at Reina's illustrates the limits of the political messianism of the past. One young poet writes of "his terror of shadows, after having grown up with the claims of so-much light". Another, a young vetage eran of Cuba's war in Angola. echoes the sentiment. "We're all so good, we're never going to die." Yet another of those welcomed on Reina's roottop, Rolando Prats, has gone further committing the cardinal sin of organising a would-be political party. For his efforts, he was beaten up several times by the security forces on the streets of Havana.

Yet the work of those gathered at Reina's, even the handful of those who have put themselves on the line politically, effectively ignores politics. This is a group that claims to be "taken with ideas which abolish space and time", "Cuba is breaking apart," says Omar Pérez, a 30-year-old poet and translator, a man who recently served a year's punitive stint in the military for his allegedly political activities, "We're trying to find ground zero from which we can begin again."

These days, after decades of socialism's didactic literature. their "ground zero" translates into work dense with symbol and obscure philosophical references. One of the group, Roberto Fránquiz, aged 31, has nearly completed a 450-page anthology of the work of his generation.

"The best work of young poets today in Cuba isn't dissident poetry, nor is it likely to be," says Rolando Sánchez Meijas. 35, a poet and short story writer. He should know. For several years until his expulsion from the Cuban Communist Party in the early 1990s, he directed the country's extensive network of talleres or "writing workshops", a cultural network that, like Cuba's educational system, has been recognised internationally for its excellence. A great many of the young poets on the island passed through these workshops. According to Sanchez Meijas: "Fear doesn't begin to explain the current direction of poetry among the young in Cuha

Cultural repression certainly exists. Two journalists are now being held in Cuban jails: Yndamiro Restano, who founded an opposition political party, was sentenced in 1992 to 10 years. And Pablo Reves Martinez is serving an eight-year sentence. He was convicted of "enemy propaganda" - specifically, of giving information on human rights abuses to a radio station run by Cuban exiles in Miami.

But Fidel's regime usually saves its punch for its more overtly political foes. For writers, ideological deviation has most often been answered with marginalisation But most of Cuba's young poets are pretty marginalised already. Besides. when politics have come too close for too long," says Sanchez Mejias, "when they have encroached on the most intimate details of daily life, small wonder we have this writing which

cal apathy as well as for his homosexuality.

According to Antonio Ponte. aged 30. "the task this generation has set for itself is to try to pin down an island bern out of so much imagination that imagination can no longer describe... let alone contain it. That's our dilemma," he says, "and, perhaps, Cuba's tragedy. Reina Maria Rodriguez never

intended to be the centre of any group. While other writers of her generation - she's 42 were filling important cultural posts in Havana, she let official dom go its way. She wanted time to write. Supporting herself with radio and TV work. she made the time. She set out to catch "the language of the intimate'

It would take Cuban culture nearly a decade to conclude the debate that her poetry fuelled on - whether "the intimate" was ever worthy of revolutionary literature. By then Reina had left behind what San chez Mejías has described as her "lyrical, highly accessible verse". In his opinion, "she's been one of the very few of her generation able to let go of the fiction of Cuba's brave new world, and flesh out her own symbols." In the early 1970s, in a nod to

officialdom. Reina accepted what she thought would be a brief volunteer stint working with the Hermanos Saiz brigade, a rather haphazard state institution set up for young artists, as a first step into the revolution's cultural networks. Every time she became weary of bureaucracy and tried to leave. the young called her back. Now, within the cultural establishment, she is known as "the attorney for the young". It's not always a compliment.

Even after she left the Hermanos Saiz in the early eighties she managed to pursue numerous projects for young writers. One by one, the younger writers - perhaps 60 - began to congregate at Reina's rooftop. Artists and writers come here to shower if there's no water, to study when there's no light at home. Havana's current austerity measures include rationed electricity in most parts of the city By chance. Reina's house is in a section whose underground cables cannot regularly be turned on or off without damaging them permanently. When writers like Omar Pérez aren't able to read publicly anywhere else, they read on her "patio", a euphemism for the part of the roof that isn't her house. When anybody is able to locate any extra food, they bring it here.

Almost every Cuban novelist has described the island's women as nervous. And fasttalking Reina is no exception. "There seem to be bursts of poetry in Cuba." she says, "One centred once around Lezama in the mid-1940s and 1950s. Something similar is happening now

Often at dusk, taciturn, round-shouldered Rogelio Saunders, aged 31, is at Reina's. Home from the war in Angola, and working as a night watchmarr, he is fascinated by post-

Another participant in the group is Victor Fowler Calzada, aged 34, a rather lordly exsecondary school teacher. One of the most privileged of the group. Fowler currently edits the occasional compilation of lectures from the Havana based Film Institute of Oabriel Garcia Márquez. Erotica is what most fascinates him. "Bodies are only the pretext," he writes. "The real drama is the unease, anxiety trying to possess it all." And, of course, there's Ro-

lando Sánchez Mejias. Once the the crown prince of Cuba's cultural establishment, he supports himself by selling flowers on the streets of Havana, More of the work of the recitop group is dedicated to him even than to Reina. "The dignity of the world," he writes, "may consist in conserving some small bit of its min

over a dozen countries. From Rema's roof you can always hear the sound of drums. There's so much drumming in Cuba, drumming itself seems almost the island's subtext. Yet it feels even stronger in a district like Remas. Home to whores before the revolution, itstill remains poor and caliente (hot), as they say in Havana. Much of the island's drumming is a variant of the sacred drumming of Santeria, a Creole faith so widespread that it's known in Cuba simply as "the religion". And you can't understand

Cuba," says Monsignor Carlos Manuel de Cespedes, the Roman Catholic Church's vicar-general in Havana, "without understanding Santeria.

Yet there's almost no reference to this in the work of the young poets, although it fills the canvases of several generations



Cats and catalyst ... Reina, central figure in the most 'authentic' literary movement seen on the island in decades

There are women here as well. Their work tends to be less abstract and philosophical, more immediate and closely observed. The baby of the group, languid Alessandra Molina. aged 24, works at a municipal arts centre and describes herself as a student of the Japanese writer, Yukio Mishimo. Burly Damaris Calderón Pérez, aged 27, works occasionally with Cuban radio and writes with scepticism of that most Latin American of cliches - the intoxication of love

And there is Reina herself... Once she explained to me that "everything in Cuba is torn between two poles. No other island is more idealistic or more pragmatic, more romantic or more obscene, more reverent or more blasphemous." Likewise, no one in this group is more

of post-revolutionary painters. Why doesn't "ground zero" in writing include so vital a tradition?

"Fidel tried to use Santeria." Sánchez Meijas explains, "For many of us, it's been contaminated. And those writers who did use the themes of Santeria in their work were often those who served the regime with few seminles

It's not just Santeria. Popular culture itself has became suspect for many of these young poets. Cuba is noisy, yet their work is silent. Cuba is full of wicked humour, yet much of their work is sombre. Even today, Cubans remain deeply connected to each another. Yet according to the vision of Rogelio Saunders, "the world grows through loneliness.

"Many of us are more con-

rarely existed in Cuba, "even before the acvolution". He refers to "a "thinking language where poetry meets philosophy, especially metaphysics - in the tradition of T.S Eliot. Pound. Borges, Octavio Paz, Julio Cortazar, and of course, Lezama Lima. As Lezama put it, referring to a character in his Paradiso, "he knows that a day has been assigned to him in which he will be transfixed, and he will not see the fish inside the current but the fish in the starry basket of eternity. Nearly all of these voices appear in the work of Sanchez Mejias. Regarded by his peers as one of their best, his style is measured like that of Borges Together with most of the

roottop group, Sanchez Mejias shares the very Spanish obsession with death. While he may claim to distance himself from magic realism, he grew up on Cuban soil. He writes of those strange coincidences that make a mockery of space and time. A critic has described his work as "the most elegant of horror stories"

Antonio Ponte's work might be described as the stuff of horror as well though it would be more accurate to say that it deals with the supernatural Ponte 30 and still boyish, has been winning writing awards in Cuba since he was eight. He's a hydraulic engineer turned screenwriter. More than the others. Ponte respects the island's popular culture, and incorporates its contradictions. For Ponte, the divine is always close at hand on the island. He perceives Cubans to be driven by hidden energies, by gods who can often appear capricious and are certainly beyond our understanding, "Poor humankind," he writes, "trying to remain clean of mud, dry of

The real tragedy of Cuba, he says, "isn't so much politics or underdevelopment: rather, it's the impossibility of living with the gods so close." Cuba, he says, "suffers from an overabundance of religious imagination

Omar Pérez agrees, describing a Cuban compulsion "not to he different from one another hut from ordinary reality " Ponte thinks that "Cubans are always trying to dance with the shadow of god," or, less romantically, "we're given to a kind of schizophrenia, always looking over our shoulders, trying to talk to God, or to curse him. Nothing is ever settled in Cuba he says. "A god or a hurricane may strike at any moment. The earth here is the real protago-

I thought of Cuba's lilac light and how, at night, whole plazas seem to melt. "The Cuban earth holds memory for its people. The island itself knows far more than we do. It pulls at us, often giving euphoria, but never any peace at all."

"At best, many in the government are dismayed by us," says Sanchez Mejias. "They see even our apolitical writing as amounting to a critique, but they don't know how or what to do about it.

lished: Lezama, Alejo Carpentier, Virgilio Piñera, Reinaldo Arenas.

In that ore "the magazine or the Casa de las Americas (a pan-Latin American cultural organisation conceived by the revolution) was the best that Cuba --ever produced. But by the latera-1960s it was all over. What had been a cultural revolution in the best sense of the word was finished. Some believe the revolution itself ended at that time.

And the 1970s? Perez is unequivocal. "The seventies were the years of lead." In 1971, atten a four-year cat-and-mouse game. the poet Heberto Padilla was jailed for over a month. No one in the Writers' Union had gone further in public criticism of what was fast becoming the state literature" of Cuba.

The Padilla affair, as it came to be called, inaugurated an un- i than the 1970s, the 1980s

to the 1960s - that was the And as always. hype," says Omar Perez. on the horizon. O Everyone was supposed to be to the two groups able to publish and to travel." the Island and the Reina is less cynical. "During as "two sets of la in what was alwa most of the decade, the Ministry sides, too savage or Culture did try to support Cuban artists," Many of the in economics and some point surely young poets agree even if some see that support as political groups will meet.

expediency

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agreeing to certain controver-

perhaps the most notorious

case, in 1989, a young painter

ert, defecating on Granma, the

of his show. He was sentenced

All this may be despite the near-h Indeed, the decade is full of stories of highly-placed Cultural where. For as Sai Almstry officials forced to stanbuts it, "we who ! sense of how to plan" (instant retirement), efter othing is about and so Rema, v stal readings and extentions, in

out to be heroic, o fight for autonom fight nearly as oil gave a new twist to performance of the poets gathe root. And tonight Party newspaper, in the middle nights, she tosses keys down from t to six months in jail. "Far more young, calling to below