SCENES FROM A SAN JUAN BALCONY

by

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A roar of wings resonates
down Calle del Cristo
and pigeons lumbering up
float a rain of feathers
in their clumsy wake

Trinitarias make a statement in red
on the balcony across the street,
the building painted subtler than sky.
Canarias hang heavy yellow heads
and weep a petal or two

through metal railings elaborate as lace
and Latin red tape to strangle
Historic Zones and Monuments, razing trees
of centuries and laying eggs of blind cement
to pave the island paradise by Year 2000

The air is rent by a Cunard horn
Caribbean royalty generic on cruisers
each a palace or clinic on water
gushing out waves of tourists
flashy in catalog clothes

into the blue-stoned colonial streets
bulging with bodies tethered to cameras,
donned in shopping bags and decisive as willows,
eddying past stripes of cold air blasted
from arched storeways, around a clot of people
Independentistas protesting,
"¡Give me liberty or give me death!
but I'll settle for a Budweiser . . ."
and Volvos preferred by well-groomed lunatics
driving their weapons to auto-destruction

Mercedes DAT-805 has a bar in the trunk
where a macho bows and mixes jumbo rums
to whet his wheels, while a woman hangs her self
in a closet one story up when the lights go out
(cause instant camaraderie in gossip at dawn)

Like a magnet, a beggar draws swarms
of people to stare at the wounds
he cultivates on his legs
llagas nurtured to shame his family
and repel us at the last instant

We're opposite poles that cannot meet
because they are so near
and there but for the grace ...
will a quarter be sufficient?
or too much? we wonder when we see him

limp all the way to the bank.
Carmen la Flor has deeded a bench
in the plaza of the ruiseñor*
but her fellows keep her up all night
so she's cranky for coffee and Coke

*Mockingbirds have better manners
each a flock of one to call away the afternoon
exuberant as mold and flowers and fairytale
fruits, banapples and roseplums
milk and honey rotting in the trees

My first day in Old San Juan
I meandered through a movie with stars
pretending to eat at an outdoor café.
Peripheral to their constellation, a young
man's cadaver in a blinding white sheet

his bullet-hole neat on the corner of Luna
or maybe Sol, but the sun is too bright
to be an enigma on either street.
Now I have walked in an infinity of photographs
taken by tourists who must edit me out
with the cables choking every view
and litter drifting on the curbs at dawn,
with the corpses, distinguished from the living
by spoor and soupline recognition
while La Fortaleza hulks, picturesque and oblivious

A basket bounces down on a ribbon
from another balcony infested
by comejen hungry for wood and books
as the aroma of orange juice is served
up to us by the Atlantic breeze
along
these byways of nuns and lanes named for saints
the click-clack of dominoes by men made idle
in plazas embroidered by traffic
When a bus hits a car illegally parked
its driver receives a standing ovation

An eagle errs into Old San Juan
but soon turns his wings
to tear a slit in the sky
planing back to his green-coated mountains
in Bayamón (mountains mine, too)
and
where the roofs are like bonnets
still tied to their houses
in case of a hurricane,
and lizards are residents
to terrify or amuse us

A man now nameless
heaps himself like garbage
cradled in a doorstep staked out
years ago, when he sailed away
on his aspirations and they drowned

Dogs echo down, leashed to their masters,
the ferry to Cataño peeps in irritation
and a glass shatters on
cobblestones, as a Gregorian chant
floats up to meet the feathers.