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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,  
eddy 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  
(causing 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  
//agas 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 <sup>the</sup> trees

My first day in Old San Juan  
I meandered through a movie with stars  
pretending to eat at an outdoor café. *e*  
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

San Juan Balcony/McHale Wood/3

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*  
on ~~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

*tink-tink*

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)~~

*nearby, where*  
*white herons dine out on black cows*  
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.