Everywhere Flies the American Flag

by Suzanne Roberts

I. The publico rattled along, bounced over pot holes, locals called out their stop: Tex-Ah-Co. We veered past McDonalds, pulled over to the gas station just long enough for the men to get off the bus. A pregnant woman held on to an open window, she wore a Wal-Mart nametag: Esmeralda in tidy black letters under the blue star. At her stop, we swerved around a gas tanker to the shoulder of the highway. The driver yelled, ¡Tonto! Esmeralda stepped out to a cacophony of exhaust fumes, tires on asphalt, the sound of horns. We took off again, nearly knocked a woman off a bicycle. The man next to me fingered the sign of the cross over a sunken chest, whispered, Por el amor del Dios. The little girl on his lap cuddled a blonde baby doll. The driver turned back to look at us, asked, Donde you want to go?

II. We arrived to the ferry, crossed the bluest waters, bent palms shook their heads against a hazy morning sky. At the dock in Culebra, taxi drivers shouted from cars, Flamenco Beach, Playa Soldado. Crazy Joann pushed her way through the ferry crowd, she held a Cuba Libre with two straws in one hand, and shook a miniature plastic American flag with the other. Tropical-print Bermuda shorts showed tanned skin, hanging loose over old legs like the craggy hide of an elephant seal. Paper umbrellas twirled pink and yellow from her faded straw hat. Before she broke into song—“California” by Phantom Planet—she told us This ain’t no paradise. I ought to know. Wear a shirt or you’ll get a ticket. Swim at your own risk. Watch out for rusting Army tanks. And don’t touch the coral, there’s unexploded bombs down there, thanks to us, the good old US of A. Use the buddy system or you’ll beee soh-reee—California, here I come, Right back where I started from…

III. She’s right, you know—In the rain forest, coquies sing each to each, but beneath the quiet sea, the bombas wait.