

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.