...anecdotes of a life ill-lived, of a life sung out of tune, phrases, anecdotes of thick-skinned survivors whose hearts are free of debts, anecdotes told in a charming sputter of Puerto Rican Spanish, bubbling in its perfect rhythm and tone...

By Luis Rafael Sánchez  Translated by Diana L. Velez

A startled cry releases the buried silences, one by one. The stewardess slowly backs away, angelic, innocent, like a character out of a short story by Horacio Quiroga, a blonde of a frozen intensity who would obliterate the illusory drives of love easily smitten King Kong. The passenger's anxious face swells exaggerated premonitions, as they turn, ready to encounter a hand grasping a gun, a knife, or a homemade bomb. For the startled cry must surely be either the unexplained and hysterical denunciation of one more airplane hijacker or the cry of a menacing lunatic. An "Our Father" wavers and breaks the released silence. The stewardess continues her backward movement. The stewardess has seen her reflection in her pool of fear and fear has not avoided her gaze, marking instead with a pallor that is conclusive promise of a faint. But the airplane hijacker or the menacing lunatic are nowhere in sight. Humble and sincere "Our Fathers" burst forth on various levels of faith and cruelty, lights flash on, violating restraints and exposing the full pallor of heartbeats. The airplane becomes a mammoth, dissected by indiscernible fluorescence at 31,000 feet above sea level. The captain or co-pilot of the airplane appears, together with the official engineer or mechanic, and their studied nonchalance excites a stir of discomfiture and caution. The rest of the crew is alerted. Hisvar's attempt ignites a spark that grows threatening. The stewardess is now an inch away from being consumed by horror. But the airplane hijacker or the menacing lunatic is nowhere in sight.

Suddenly, with incomparable license and turpitude, a spell of laughter corrupts the equal measure both the silence and the "Our Fathers" that have advanced, on some lips, as far as the Amao. Pure in offense, the paraphrase cut by it is so perfect that it could be glued to a page, the spell of laughter infects the hundreds of passengers on an airplane that makes nightly trips between Puerto Rico and New York's airport. Peaks of laughter, delightful because of the disorder and ferocity of their emergence, a disorder that precedes automatic convergence, a ferocity that reveals secret and unforgotten resentments. A nervous Nellie might see at this point that all the chiming and shaking caused by the widespread hilarity endangers the safety of the airplane, and the small voice of a passenger (praying much sacrifice the sacred sheet of their golden looks just to know what the devil is making these men do) loudly, traveling so un-self-consciously in their midst. Only the crew, uniformly grinning as it is this evening, seems immune to the laughter, immune to the infectious laughter, immune to the mockery aimed at the fear of the blonde stewardess's angelic and innocent countenance—just a minute ago.

Gales of laughter threaten to despoil the otherwise solemn young-usual airplane laughter, threatening, for the incredible cause of the communion is rich; there for all to see. There on the thickly carpeted aisle of the airplane, swagging like a couple of巴黎, strolling like a pair of bulls, indifferent to the snooty and fear-embittered by their presence, are a pair of well-acquainted, pompous, and healthy-looking crabs.

Paradoxically, their healthy glow is the very harbinger of their imminent fate—tomorrow they will be called stewards on Prospect Avenue or Junior filling in the South Bronx or baked crab with cream butter in Sunset Park or crab mantis in picante sauce on the Lower East Side or temporary inhabitants of a crab colony in the cultivated recesses of a darkened basement, hidden from the inspecting gaze of a super or a landlord. But tonight, their healthy glow and their unexpected use of the airplane as a means of stepping some, their acquisition of an informal right of way, are the subjects of lively conversation and vivid sketches, preoccupying the generalized disorder that now reigns, a disorder that reigns by means of a loosening of spirits and widespread return to exalted prose, the asanche choreography of bodies straining, bending, straightening, twisting in the impersonation of these seats, a generalized disorder spurred on by unadulteratedly patriotic discourses and assimilationist cross-examinations, by of-color jokes of every hue, by womanizing gazes flicking man-hunting eyes, by described true confessions—we can't resist the auto-epigraphical—by the state testimony of repeated humiliations on the crossown bus, the elevator, the dammed job, the liberal university, the Jewish workshop, the generalized disorder suddenly extends a divining line, invisible but palpable between them, the prophet, and, as the Puerto Rican, a line whose contours are heightened by the unprovocative assertion of a brown-skinned woman who, while making the previous offering of nutritious liquid from her boil and radiant breast to her newborn infant states: the bystander; they are, the dumber; a disorder that inspires fear, or so it seems, in the crew (uniformly grinning) as it is tonight.

Taken aback by the unexpected collapse of modern technology, amazed that the rigor of the security devices could have amassed that unmentionable contraband, the crew demands that the crabs' owner identify himself immediately. They do this with gestures defining an overly

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swaying of the island breezes produces a certain psychic vertigo while the constant struggle for survival in New York produces a certain tranquility. Puerto Ricans who are confused, annoyed and disturbed by their inability to live uninteruptedly in Puerto Rico and who become needlessly irritated and needlessly uncomfortable, become captives of their own needless explanations. "Listen pal, the only thing people are into on the island is drinking and joking, having a good time, listen old buddy, everything's a big hassle in Puerto Rico and I tell you, in Puerto Rico the lack of mental rigor and the glorification of speech for its own sake entices me but it leaves me bewildered, my friend, folks down there will break your word and stay as cool as a cucumber. I'll tell you, I've seen my face over here and I find myself just down there except maybe I cry it's down there for a while and then if I don't like it I'll just slip back up here again." Puerto Ricans who want to be down there but must be here, Puerto Ricans who must be down there but can't put down there, Puerto Ricans who are there but dream of being here, Puerto Ricans whose lives are spread out between the question marks that burst from the two adverse forces, the material state, Pan American Airlines, and the permanent installed in the wander-ground between here and there and who must therefore internalize the trip, making it little more than a hop on a bus, though airheads, that float over the creek to which the Atlantic Ocean has been reduced by the Puerto Ricans. A crossing over the Atlantic made simpler so as to return, go, return more, a return fervently and loudly applauded whenever the airhead lands another.

My neighbor brings up once more the incident turned ancestor involving the crate and aims the inevitable. "And where are you from?" I say as soon as they announce "In a few minutes we are going to land in the John F. Kennedy International Airport." I reply "I'm from Puerto Rico" only to hear her respond with a surly, angry psychic "That's written all over your face." "From Humacao?" I add, no doubt pleasing her for she agrees stating "I've been to Humacao" but she looks at me as if I've shortchanged her, as if I've thoughtlessly forgotten that the village she described as "trivial" and "unimportant" tribal community impose their authority on the airways where dialogues lose their loincloths and the opening between speakers is broadcasted by the belief that an apparent equality and solidarity between Puerto Ricans is made possible by chance and fate. "Where are you from?" I ask though I know full well what the answer will be. With a coquettish twinkle in her eye and a shameless blush in her cheek she replies "I'm from Puerto Rico," forcing me to say, just slightly psychic. "Even the blind can see that much," adding "From which town in Puerto Rico?" And she specifies "From New York."

It might be a tired cliché or an unfortunate geographical slip or a joke vibrating with sarcasm, or a new drawing of the boundaries of the silent but sweet revenge of the invaded invading the invader. It is, of course, all of that and more. It is the story, that history books fail to tell. It is the obverse of the rhetorical wist that slips out of politics reach. It is the daum missed by statistical counts. Its the translucent testament that confirms once more the validity of poetry. Is it the overdue and just payment for soul watchers who watched in worry and doubt from the decks of the steamship Antonia P. Cozmo as the outline of their beloved island disappeared forever into the horizon; it is the remembrance of those who emerged from the stupor of 14 hours of travel in the narrow and uncomfortable flying machines of Pan American. It is reality's current, elevating and dazzling it's pursuit of a new space, furiously conquered. It is the course of a nation aloft between two ports where the contradiction is hope.