

Waiting for Alejendro

The alley was filled with weather-beaten shacks,
little more than lean-tos with tin roofs,
dirt floors, fire pits at the entrances
where beans continually cooked in blackened pots.
The street was littered with chickens,
goats, ragged children. And here he sat,
on an orange crate, in a slightly damp suit,
scraping mud off his Rockports with an old tin lid.

He was thirsty but didn't dare ask for water.
He picked up a smooth pebble from the ground.
The faucet in his room seldom had pressure,
but when it did, the water ran a thick, reddish brown.
A bus screeched to a clumsy stop and then,
with gears grinding, lumbered off, spewing fumes.
The smells were another thing.

A child, dressed mostly in dust,
wandered over, chewing on a tortilla.
Her eyes were black, unblinking.
He smiled, quickly withdrew a flat balloon
from his pocket, blew it up, twisted it
into the shape of a dog. The child took the balloon
without smiling, continued to stand there,
chewing, watching him.

He could see his companion coming out
of the corner store with two Cokes.

It was always Coke. They would drink while they waited,
waited for Alejandro, who wanted to know more.

He threw the pebble into the brackish puddle
next to his foot. It looked like the same water
that came from his tap.

He peered closely at the puddle, searching
for the face of God on the water.

After a while, it was his face he found.

—Marilyn Darley Williams