

Barrio Vietnam

She was the dictator's sister, Ofelia Japonesa
Sister of the lecherous Generalísimo Rafael Leónidas Trujillo who
Ruled the Dominican Republic with unspeakable cruelty for three decades
Bogus medals festooning his chest like soda bottle caps
He gave the house on *Avenida Independencia* to his slant-eyed sister
A mansion on the tree-arched street leading to *el centro*
Along which *los cepillos*, shiny, black VWs, slid through tropical nights
Sweeping up dissidents and speeding them to torturous deaths
Her mansion, two blocks from *el Malecón* and blue ocean breeze
Once painted gleaming white but now
Grimy, stucco crumbling, porch pillars cracking
Front steps askew, doors long removed
This was the house of *La Japonesa* and now it is
Barrio Vietnam.

Raucous parties were held here
(To whom could the neighbors complain?)
Rum-soaked sycophants seeking her brother's favor
Windows from which once light had blazed and
Merengue music had gushed forth were now only
Blind eyes unable to see the devastated yard where the
Pinks and oranges and yellows of jasmine, hibiscus and *buganvilia*
Were carefully cultivated and groomed to please the
Slanted eyes of the dictator's sister, *La Japonesa*.

Then the dictator was assassinated
His bullet-pocked body stuffed in a car trunk
His brutal reign exploded and *La Japonesa* fled, terrified, to Spain with
Luggage stuffed with pesos her brother had stolen from his country
Los pobres invaded his many mansions like hornets, swarming
Into the house on *Avenida Independencia*
Angrily wrenching apart the gold-trimmed furnishings imported from Europe
Breaking windows, trampling gardens
Smashing flowered porcelain from France, etched crystal from Belgium
Tearing fixtures from the bathrooms
Building new nests in the debris
Two or three families crammed in each room
Constructing a shanty town in the front and back yards
Tiny huts built of cardboard, dirt floors and leaking roofs
Separated by narrow, muddy walkways
Filling them with naked babies and transistor radios
Blaring *merengue* and loud commercials.

The squatters call their ramshackle village *Barrio Vietnam*
With an irony born of poverty and squalor
In homage to the faraway country *los gringos* bombed and ravaged
Like they did here, to stifle a righteous revolution and install a
Puppet president, the dictator's sidekick during thirty-three years of
Genocide, tortures, murders, rapes, assassinations on this small island of
Undulating palms, turquoise waters, flowering trees where the poor
Waited and waited and waited, then took what was theirs, thinking
El Jefe's death was their release from fear and misery, though of course it only meant
A different body occupying the seat of power.

Now young girls with gigantic neon pink rollers embedded in their hair
Laugh and sway to the infectious *meringue* beat, taunting
The leering boys with sweaty faces glimmering like polished metal
Young mothers wonder how much they can water down the *habichuelas*
The little shack-store on the sidewalk sells
A half cup of cooking oil, a cup of milk, a few ounces of sugar or salt, *una Coca*
And the vendor on his folding chair offers single cigarettes, *chicle* and *dulces*
From his tray on folding legs, beseeching passers-by to stop
A single bulb using stolen electricity lights the *barrio* at night
A gossiping line waits with dented pitchers and pails for water from a single faucet, water
From cracked pipes buried centuries ago next to the cracked sewer pipes
Plátanos, yucas, onions, garlic fry all day in re-used cooking oil
Noisy chaos and pungent smells have replaced the
Intoxicating jasmine, hibiscus and *buganvilia* that crawled up the pillars
And the blue breeze from the ocean blows the thick, ochre odor of human waste from the
empty lot behind the mansion over the entire neighborhood.

La Japonesa has been gone a long time, forgotten forever
Her bullet-ridden brother's reign but another sorrowful chapter in the history of sadism
The house of *la Japonesa* is almost obscured by the honeycomb of humanity
Crying, laughing, fighting, scrabbling, birthing, dying, living, surviving
In the dark, tumble-down shacks and narrow pathways, the muck and mire of
El Barrio Vietnam.

Barbara Peabody 2007