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Fiesta de Cumpleanos en Los Haticos

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Fiesta de Cumpleanos en Los Haticos

Lorna Van Gilst

Uno, dos, tres, cuatro...ocho bodies spill from
old Chevrolets wedged randomly
into the dusty street.

Bearing gifts, we kiss our way into the crowd
cheek to cheek,
soft or whiskery—

¿Cómo estás?...Bien...muy bien. . .

Gleaming young faces with
deep pools for eyes,
soft fleshy cheeks,
lips glossy pink or Revlon red
dark tresses swirled into ringlets of upswept curls—

Up the leaning steps we go, into the clean-swept yard
splitting with sound—

Sweat-glistened couples swirling in salsa rhythms,
firecrackers popping at their heels.

Emilia greets us one by one with her tight squeeze.

“¡Feliz cumpleaños!” we say. *“¡Feliz cumpleaños!”*

“¡Gracias! Gracias!” she beams.

We move through the open corridor,
past kitchen smells of simmering soup
into the silence of the courtyard

“Siéntate aquí”—sit here, in a circle of wooden chairs.

Into our hands young girls place bowls of *sancocho*—
large chunks of beef and yucca, carrots and *papas*,
flat disks of corn still on the cob—
all swimming in the steamy broth.

Plates of *ensalada*, *plátanos* fried sweet in butter, rice—

Large mugs of Coca Cola over uneven chunks of ice—

Closing the circle, the young ones stand and watch each bite—

“How do you like it?” they ask.

“Delicioso,” we say.

“How do you like it?” they ask again.

“Rquísimo...sabrosísimo,” we say.

We gather then, a circle of bodies around *la torta grande*,
its single red taper
glowing in the night

“Feliz, feliz cumpleaños deseamos para ti—”

Happy, happy birthday we say to you—

and kiss our way back
to the old Fords and Chevys.

Layered in, we spin away through the strains of Los Haticos.