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Contemplating Greek Mythology While Gazing at the Waters of San Juan Bay

by Frank Varela

I

Let’s say they got the legend all wrong. Icarus, Daedalus’s son, never flamed out for a seaman’s death in the blue Aegean, but flew, never near the sun, escaping the Labyrinth for an exile’s life on Cristo Street, right here in Old San Juan. Now the real story: He, Icarus, astonished by the adrenaline of flight, could not abide a life of ordinary existence. Father, son squabbled, came to blows. Leaving the old man behind, Icarus flew back to Athens to earn his bread as a philosopher among philosophers. In Corinth, he met a local girl, where she, now his wife, gave birth to a stillborn child—

II

I, Ricardo Seis, knew Oedipus Rex, whose unholy marriage had offended the Gods. Do you recall the Mapplethorpe photos? His face encased in leather, flesh bound, crouching naked against a New York skyline. Then there was the night he and Foucault deconstructed a cheap Merlot over the head of a Fire Island muscle boy—public relations nightmare. The official story—Death in Colonus—

III

“The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.”

Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus

Boricuas coming north in the belly of birds, monstrous creatures with metallic wings, and strangely dead luminous eyes, flying through purgatory sky-blue candy, where foolish Icarus once rose and fell to earth in a heap of wax and feathers.

Boricuas hauling bundles in cardboard suitcases along neon lit New York City boulevards, stomping snow off thin soled shoes, clutching notes scribbled by unschooled abuelas to addresses near Columbus Circle, where the river gods had seduced the maids of summer.

Boricuas defining patience as paying boatman Charon to take them to dead-end jobs in Brooklyn, as peeking from behind triple-bolted doors, when Zeus in the form of a swan ravished Leda near the boathouse in Central Park.

Boricuas bracing shoulders against an immense clay covered mass, teeth biting lower lips, feet struggling for footing, effort straining motion against a stone bigger than their dreams that gravity rolled down a littered Garment District alley, where just two days before, Medea had slain her children, not in vengeance, but out of love.