

West Indies, U.S.A.

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Cruising at thirty thousand feet above the endless green
the islands seem like dice tossed on a casino's baize,

Analysis: The title itself carries an important implication before the poem begins. Written as "West Indies, U.S.A.", with a comma, it reads like an address: "Kingston, Jamaica" or "Dallas, Texas." This format positions the West Indies as a subset or territory of the United States, as though the region is owned by America the way a city is owned by its country. The West Indies is reduced from a collection of independent, culturally distinct nations to a single item appended to the USA.

The simile "islands seem like dice tossed on a casino's baize" compares the Caribbean islands to dice on a gambling table, suggesting that the prosperity of each island is left to chance rather than determined by the merit or effort of its people. The image also suggests disunity: the dice are scattered, separate, each playing its own game.

some come up lucky, others not. Puerto Rico takes the pot,

Analysis: The gambling metaphor continues: "takes the pot" implies Puerto Rico has won the economic lottery of the Caribbean. Note the diction: Puerto Rico didn't "win" or "receive" the pot; it "took" it. In poker, the pot is made up of all the other players' money. To take the pot is to take from everyone else. Puerto Rico's prosperity, the poem implies, came at the expense of the wider Caribbean.

the Dallas of the West Indies, silver linings on the clouds

Analysis: The allusion to Dallas, a wealthy, oil-rich city in Texas, reinforces Puerto Rico's comparative affluence. But the allusion cuts deeper: just as the United States annexed Texas from Mexico in 1845, it annexed Puerto Rico from Spain in 1898, making it a US territory. Both Dallas and Puerto Rico were acquired. The silver linings on the clouds are a visual image (the sun outlining clouds as the plane descends) but also an ironic cliché, optimism that the poem will systematically undercut.

as we descend are hall-marked, San Juan glitters

like a maverick's gold ring.

Analysis: The simile "like a maverick's gold ring" presents San Juan as flashy and non-conformist, an outsider among Caribbean islands. The word "maverick" suggests Puerto Rico operates by different rules, set apart by its American ownership. This image of glitter and gold, however, foreshadows the later revelation that it is merely "fool's glitter."

All across the Caribbean

we'd collected terminals – airports are like calling cards,

cultural fingermarks;

Analysis: The metaphor "airports are like calling cards" and "cultural fingermarks" suggests that airports serve as compact representations of each country's identity and economic condition. Each one leaves a distinct impression of the culture it belongs to.

the hand-written signs at Port-
au-Prince, Piarco's sleazy tourist art, the lethargic
contempt of the baggage boys at 'Vere Bird' in St. Johns...

Analysis: The listing of airports across the Caribbean, Haiti, Trinidad, and Antigua, highlights underdevelopment and economic struggle. Details like "hand-written signs" and "lethargic contempt" paint a picture of neglect and disillusionment in contrast to what awaits in San Juan.

And now for plush San Juan.

Analysis: The short, blunt sentence creates a dramatic pause and contrast. "Plush" emphasises luxury, but the tone is laced with irony given what follows.

But the pilot's bland,
you're safe in my hands drawl crackles as we land,
"US regulations demand all passengers not disembarking
at San Juan stay on the plane, I repeat, stay on the plane."

Analysis: The pilot's "drawl" subtly marks him as Southern American, carrying connotations of racial tension and authority. The repetition of "stay on the plane" mimics the authoritative, dehumanising tone of American institutional control.

Subtle Uncle Sam, afraid too many desperate blacks
might re-enslave this Island of the free,

Analysis: Irony and sarcasm dominate here. "Uncle Sam" is a metonym for the United States government. The phrase "Island of the free" is a sardonic play on the American national anthem's "land of the free," exposing the hypocrisy of America's freedom rhetoric when applied to people of colour. The word "re-enslave" is historically loaded, evoking the legacy of slavery.

might jump the barbed
electric fence around 'America's
back yard' and claim that vaunted sanctuary... 'Give me your poor...'

Analysis: The allusion to "America's backyard" references Reagan-era rhetoric about American dominance in the Caribbean. "Give me your poor" alludes to Emma Lazarus's poem engraved on the Statue of Liberty, exposing the contradiction between America's humanitarian self-image and its discriminatory practices toward Caribbean people.

Through toughened, tinted glass the contrasts tantalise;

Analysis: The symbolism of "toughened, tinted glass" represents the barrier between the speaker and the reality of Puerto Rico; he can see it, but only through a filter, and cannot access it. It also suggests that the American lens distorts and obscures truth.

US patrol cars glide across the shimmering tarmac,
containered baggage trucks unload with fierce efficiency.

Analysis: The diction "fierce efficiency" contrasts with the "lethargic contempt" of earlier Caribbean airports, highlighting how American influence transforms even labour into a militarised, impersonal operation.

So soon we're climbing,
low above the pulsing city streets;
galvanised shanties overseen by condominiums

Analysis: The juxtaposition of "galvanised shanties" and "condominiums" is the poem's most vivid image of inequality. The word "overseen" is deliberate: the wealthy literally look down upon the poor, suggesting surveillance and dominance as well as physical elevation.

polished Cadillacs shimmying past Rastas with pushcarts

Analysis: The contrast between "polished Cadillacs" and "Rastas with pushcarts" encapsulates the economic divide within San Juan. "Shimmying past" implies an almost deliberate avoidance, the wealthy skirting around the poor without acknowledgement.

and as we climb, San Juan's fool's glitter calls to mind
the shattered innards of a TV set that's fallen
off the back of a lorry, all painted valves and circuits

Analysis: The extended metaphor of a broken, stolen television set is central to the poem's conclusion. "Fool's glitter" reveals the earlier golden imagery as false. The TV "fallen off the back of a lorry" is an idiomatic reference to stolen goods, implying Puerto Rico itself was acquired by dubious means, alluding to the US annexation of the island in 1898.

the roads like twisted wires,
the bright cars, micro-chips

Analysis: The similes "roads like twisted wires" and "bright cars, micro-chips" reduce the city to broken machinery: chaotic, dysfunctional, and artificial.

It's sharp and jagged and dangerous, and belonged to someone else.

Analysis: The final line delivers the poem's most powerful statement. The tricolon "sharp and jagged and dangerous" accumulates to a damning verdict on Puerto Rico's condition. "Belonged to someone else" is the poem's ultimate indictment: Puerto Rico's identity, culture, and land were taken, and what remains is a broken, stolen thing.

About the poem

Author: Stewart Brown (b. 1951)

Context: Written from the perspective of a traveller on a stopover flight across the Caribbean; reflects on American imperialism, racial discrimination, and economic inequality in the region. Puerto Rico became a US territory in 1898 after the Spanish-American War and its citizens became US citizens in 1917. It is neither a fully independent nation nor a US state, a deliberate in-between that reflects its complex colonial status.

Core idea: Puerto Rico's apparent prosperity, a product of American ownership, is exposed as superficial; beneath the glitter lies deep inequality, racial oppression, and a stolen identity.

- **Main themes**

- Oppression and discrimination
- Colonialism and American imperialism
- Economic inequality and class divide
- Caribbean identity
- Appearance vs. reality
- Race and racial injustice
- **Mood:** Initially observational and ironic, shifting to bitter and indignant
- **Tone:** Sarcastic, critical, and ultimately condemnatory

- **Remember**

- The poem moves from **aerial observation** 'ground-level reality' **damning conclusion**
- **The title** reads like an address (West Indies, USA), suggesting the West Indies is owned by or a subset of America
- **"Takes the pot"** = forceful diction; the pot is everyone else's money, and Puerto Rico's gain came at others' expense
- **Dallas allusion** = both cities were annexed by the USA from others (Texas from Mexico 1845; Puerto Rico from Spain 1898)
- The gambling metaphor establishes that Caribbean prosperity is a matter of chance and imperialism, not justice
- "Fool's glitter" is the poem's turning point: Puerto Rico's wealth is revealed as false and stolen
- The broken TV metaphor reduces Puerto Rico to damaged, stolen property
- "Belonged to someone else" ties everything together: imperialism as theft
- Airports serve as **microcosms** of each island's economic and cultural condition
- American freedom rhetoric ("Island of the free," "Give me your poor") is consistently ironised