**Perfect Soldiers by Gabriel Cortez**

My grandpa flashes a gold tooth when he smiles  
like I dare you to take something from between my lips  
His tooth shines from the light of the TV screen  
when my family watches Telemundo during dinnertime  
  
While I practice my Spanish, grandpa unhinges  
the English from his mouth, at least for a little while  
This is how we both learn to be Panamanian-American,  
through television and food  
  
He tells us of our ancestors  
How they raised maize and yucca from the earth,  
hands steeped in indigenous soil  
How as warriors, we drank cacao and water  
bitter from the gourd,  
a medicine sacred to the gods  
  
Between growing up in Colon, Panama  
and a tour in the US ARMY,  
grandpa is a proud old soldier  
marching through a never-ending war  
  
At 66, we are scared that another stroke  
could do what no war ever could  
and cut him to the ground  
  
He drinks -- like Aunt Maritsa didn’t lose both her legs to diabetes last year  
like half our neighborhood doesn’t look like the emergency ward of a hospital  
like he hasn’t seen the pictures, how it is impossible to tell the difference  
between a road-side bomb victim and someone who forgot to take their insulin  
  
Grandpa keeps at least two twelve-packs of soda in the fridge at all times  
Sunny Delight, Tampico, Hi-C, a jug of Kool-Aid in the back  
Dr. Pepper lines our refrigerator door like a vest of dynamite,  
an arsenal of ways for us to self-destruct  
  
It is how you learn to drink growing up  
in a country where soda is cheaper than clean water  
Where hunger is a canal carved deep into your belly  
Where the only options for work are the docks and the ARMY  
because your country is as occupied by Coca-Cola as it is by the US military  
  
When you must march to the call of whatever feeds family first  
you drink whatever fits conveniently in your hands  
I understand grandpa, but don’t you know  
we are still at war with a country that wants us dead?  
How us children of Panama and America learn early  
to walk softly and carry a big stick  
like Army assault rifle in one hand  
Coca-Cola bottle in the other  
  
Our country wasn’t enough,  
they are colonizing our bodies, our taste buds  
It isn’t a coincidence that the military and beverage companies  
call us their target audience,  
our black and brown bodies marching to the center of their crosshairs  
  
At home, a Coca-Cola commercial followed by a US ARMY commercial  
flickers across my grandfather’s tooth  
and they both shine like the discharge of a gun  
  
I learned to drink like grandpa,  
like Colon, Panama  
like 14 billion dollars spent  
on soft drink advertising last year  
  
The threat of diabetes is as common in our family  
as hard work, obedience and discipline  
It is as common as Coca-Cola in our refrigerator  
and we drink until the glass is empty  
cuz we ain’t never learned how to pull maize from the soil  
but we did learn to pull the tab of a Coke can  
Don’t it sound like the linchpin of a grenade?  
Both explode under pressure  
Ain’t we just time bombs then?  
  
We march until they cut the legs out from under us  
Ain’t we perfect soldiers.