

CAMINO ✈ YAHAIRA

Five Days After

Papi had stubby fingers with the tip of one missing from where a machete slipped one July day while he was cutting me a mango in the backyard.

His skin where the nail used to be is the same dark color as the mahogany chess pieces he played with.
(He tried to teach me the game

but I kept trying to include my Barbies in the battle.)

People barely noticed the missing fingertip, until you shook—in my case, held—his hand & could feel the shortened pointer finger.

Not that he tried to hide it. Papi wore his fat gold rings & gestured with every word he said.
& held a cigar to his mouth with the missing finger pointing upward.

It's just the rest of him took up a whole room & it was hard to notice he had anything missing at all except when he was the one missing,

& then it was like days were deflated,
like when his flight rose into the sky
he took all the air on earth with him.

No hay sobrevivientes.
No hay sobrevivientes.
There are no survivors.

It was a foolish hope.

Tía hugs me to her,
her white head wrap caressing my cheek.
She is a small woman & I tower over her.

Neighbors pour into the house
like our grief is a bottomless thirst
& God has tipped this pitcher of people to fill us up.

The furniture is pushed back & an Hora Santa begins.
Rosary beads pass through fingers, & the rosario repeats &
repeats.

Dios te salve, María, llena eres de gracias.

Fifty Ave Marias, five Padre Nuestros, five Gloria al Padres.
Tía shoves her words out; I repeat them,
rocking back & forth, let the words wash over me.

Later, Tía will hold a private prayer in her bóveda out back;
this is where she keeps her cowrie shells, where she will divine
from the Saints the next steps we should take;

they know all about folks crossing the Atlantic & not surviving.

We stack our faith up like spinal discs to hold us upright;
it gives us language to fill our mouths & hearts & ears.
Gives us deities to call on

that might answer & bring my father home.

Papi knew my mother since they were children.
Grew up right here, in this neighborhood of Sosúa.
They were of this home, of each other.

Grew up grew apart
at least that is what Tía says, that she remembers
how her little sister made eyes at the boy across the way.

They reconnected one day at El Malecón.
She was sitting near the water, gossiping
with a friend from university.

Mamá saw him approaching & fluffed her hair.
Papi straightened his collar. Tucked his shirt in tighter.
She laughed when her friend stuck out her hand, preened.

Papi looked taken aback.
She watched as her friend flaunted & flirted.
Papi gave Mamá a smile & secret wink.

She watched Papi extract his hand from her friend's.
Papi extended it to Mama.
She said he had his heart in it.

Although the friend was clearly taken by him,
Mamá said he had eyes for only her.
Said that at the meeting she knew he'd be
the greatest love of her life.

The day Mamá took to the fever,
Tía was paying house calls to others
who'd been struck by the dengue.

It was just me & Mamá at home
as I wiped her forehead & prayed.
When Tía got home she hopped on the phone,

& even as a kid I knew she was calling
my father. For all her remedies, there are times
when Tía knows a hospital is best.

Mamá did not want to go. Said an ambulance was too expensive.
Although Don Mateo offered his car,
Mama was worried about getting him sick.

She said we were making a big fuss,
even though she could barely speak.
It didn't help that Papi's money came too late.

Mamá died two days later.
It is not something I talk about.
Almost a decade after her passing.

Tía had always lived with us
& she mothered me the best she could.
Some folks would resent this.

But even when Mamá was alive,
Tía was the other
mother of my heart.

The one who would sing to me
when I fell & bumped my butt:
Sana, sana, culito de rana.

When he visited, Papi would tell me stories of Mamá.
How beautiful she was, brown-skinned & petite.
How hardworking she was as a maid at the resort.

He would tell me of their first date,
& the song that reminds him most of her.
My head fills with memories not my own, that paint her for me.

I've never once felt orphaned.
Not with Tía dogging my steps & smacking my hand,
& wiping my tears & telling me what my mother would say.

Not even though Papi was far,
because his presence filled the house:
his weekly phone calls & video chats,

his visits in the summer making Christmas
feel like a semiannual event.
I never felt like an orphan until today.

Two months to seventeen, two dead parents,
& an aunt who looks worried
because we both know, without my father
without his help life as we've known it has ended.

Carline texts me & I know she's still at work.

The resort is the only place where she has access to Wi-Fi.

She asks me how I'm doing, but I barely reply.

I must have sounded unconvincing when I told her I was fine, because she arrives at my house after nine, her feet swollen & shuffling, the tired bagging under her eyes.

She is still gorgeous. & I tell her so.

"Ay, Camino. No me tires piropos.

I know I look exhausted. This li'l one kept me up all night playing volleyball in my belly.

& the manager ran me ragged today."

It is a good job that Papi helped her get when she found out half a year ago she was pregnant & stopped going to school two towns over.

I want to tell her she needs to slow down on hours, but everyone in her family has to work. It's how they eat. Her boyfriend, Nelson, contributes best he can,

taking night classes & working two jobs even though he's only nineteen.

Tia places some fried fish in front of Carline, who expertly pulls the flesh,

leaving the sharp-boned carcass completely clean.

When she is done she puts her feet up, & I stand behind her weaving her hair into braids. So much has changed:

a year ago we would have sat just like this, whispering

about boys & dreams, & what we could be.

Now both of us are moving moment to moment.

Carline came to offer comfort, but I end up being the one

who wraps a blanket around her when she dozes off, finishes doing her hair gently so she can sleep in the morning, parents her as best I can

before she becomes one. & I remember I have none.



Ten Days After

I keep going to school as if nothing's happened.
There was one day where we had one moment of silence.
Most of the kids know I had a father in the States who sends money.

I am an oddity at the school.
Never been an hija de mami y papi,
children of white-collared, white-colored society types.

The rich, light-skinned Dominicans at this school
come from families who own factories
or are children of American diplomats.

I didn't have a quinceañera at a country club.
I'm American-adjacent. With a father who makes—made—
enough money to keep me in the school uniform

but not enough to contribute to the annual
fundraiser or to send me on any of the international trips
or to give me a brand-new car over Christmas break.

Papi paid just enough for tuition every quarter,
& sometimes I had to nag him when he forgot
& I'd gotten yet another payment-notification letter.

& now, I sit silently in class. Do not raise my hand.

I've been doing my assignments late at night
after Tía falls asleep. I've been studying for final exams
on the bus ride to school in the morning.

I am pretending Papi being dead does not change anything.
That submitting all my work means my plans will come true.
Even as I sit at a desk I know I may not return to in the fall.

Dreams are like the pieces of fluff that get caught in your hair;
they stand out for a moment, but eventually you wash them
away, or long fingers reach in & pluck them out

& you appear as what everyone expects.

I come from people
who are no longer alive.
My grandparents,

my parents. I have
Tia, & my father's brother,
who lives in New York,

& they are the only two
left to me who share my blood.
There is no one to go live with.

There is no one to provide help.
There are my good grades
& my aunt's aging hands.

When I am called to
the guidance counselor,
who wants to know

if I am doing okay,
I ask if she knows what will happen
if my family cannot pay tuition.

She says there are scholarships
I would have had to apply to
a semester ago;

she says funds have been allocated.
But if worse came to worst
they would figure things out

& readmit me next spring semester.
She says she wants me to succeed,
it might just take time to figure things out.

She says this with a small apologetic smile.

It would delay my graduation,
it would delay my ability to apply to college,
& it would delay just how much time

I live here.



On her next day off, Carline
drags me out of the house.
We do not turn to the beach

but instead walk over a mile
to a small strip of stores
where the tourists buy bathing suits

& faceless dolls & seashell souvenirs.
Although her breathing is heavy & her feet
are swollen, she says she needed fresh air.

But I know she means *I* needed a change.
Carline would have been a great doctor or nurse.
She has a sharp eye & was good at science.

We gaze into window after window,
pretending to be high-class ladies
who would wear fancy cover-ups over our bathing suits

& flip-flops that cost enough to cover our tabs at el colmado.
I only let Carline walk a bit more before I steer her to an
ice-cream shop.

She won't ever complain about her aches,

but I know the signs of fatigue.
I only have a few pesos to my name
but I plan to use a handful to buy us each a scoop.

The lady at the counter takes one look at Carline
& then another look at me & waves my little coins away.
She even adds extra sprinkles with her wink.

Her gesture makes me want to cry. The kindness
of a stranger, simply because she sees in us
something worthy of this small gift.

This everyday kindness in my home.
Even if I could leave,
how would I stomach it?

The thought curdles, sour as bad milk.

Carline & I walk back home arm in arm.

Our ice-cream-sticky fingers making me feel six years old again.
This day feels like a hundred other days we've spent just like this.

Looking into windows & imagining a different life
with each other by our sides.

Papi put me in the International School after Mamá's death.

But Carline & I remained friends outside of school.

Tía would leave me at her house when she had errands;

Carline's maman would send her to stay with us

when her parents took trips back to Haiti.

& so we know the different kinds of stories
our silence can tell.

Her silence tells me: Camino. I'm scared. This baby is coming.
Camino. I hate my job. Where the manager pinches my butt
& I have to smile when I feel like crying.

My silence tells her: Carline. I know. I know. I know.
Where do we go? Where is safe harbor? Together
can we swim there? Can we carry our families on our backs?

For just a moment I grab my worries by the nape.

My silence tells them: Leave me. Leave me.
Leave me alone. We will make it. We will be fine.
I promise. Some way we'll survive.

CAMINO ✈ YAHAIIRA

Fourteen Days After

My school absences are not a secret.

I've been skipping school on & off for two weeks.
& when I go back, somehow we are taking finals.

I let my teachers' words float around me
but have no idea what is due when or to who.

It all feels like such a fake world.

None of this can be real. How is it almost summer break?

What does an essay on *The Tempest* matter?

What does an analysis of the Hoover presidency matter?

What does an exam in trigonometry matter?

Which one of those things will explain mechanical failure?

Which one of those things will ease how difficult it feels to
breathe?

I stare out the windows into the warm mid-June day.

Papi left every year

from June until September.

Maybe the only way to make it through these days
is to pretend that in the fall he'll be coming back.

I am not the only one
skipping responsibilities.

Ma has not been to work
in two weeks, & last night

the spa owner called the house phone
& left a voice mail.

Today, I wake Ma up,
brush her hair into a ponytail.

I clear the chipped polish
off her nails & swipe on a pretty pink color.

I force her into a black dress
that fits much looser than it used to.

I hand her her purse
& order her a Lyft.

"Go, Ma. You have to
do something to take

your mind off of it all.

No one does your job better than you."

She gets in the car
but shakes her head sadly.

My mother, always so organized
& ready, the general

of the small spa she manages,
looks lost & tense.

I watch the car until
it turns the corner

& hold back the impulse
to chase after it,

to call Ma & ask her
to come back. To not leave.

To never leave.

I'm used to clocks. To using time to succeed.

To slapping my palm hard across a timer

as if it were running its smart mouth.

You don't have to be God to control time.

To learn speed. They say the plane

went down too fast. For life vests. Or safety plans.

Too perpendicular to readjust in time.

For a rescue to be mounted. By the time the Coast

Guard reached the sinking tail, they'd been under water
for hours. The impact alone would have killed them.

No one ever emerged. The doors never opened.

The air masks never even dropped down.

Without fail, most days I'm in school,

I get sent to the guidance counselor.

But I don't have anything to tell her.

She asks me how I'm doing. Stupid fucking question.

I want to tell her some days I wake up
to find dents on the inside of my palms

from where I've fisted my hands while sleeping,
my nails biting into the skin & leaving angry marks.

On the days I wake up with smooth palms I'm angry at myself.
There should be no breaks from this grief. Not even in sleep.

I don't tell her that. I don't tell her anything.

I chew on the little green mints she offers & wait for the bell.

On the days like today that I don't go to school,
I still go over to Dre's house.

Even when she's not there.

Dr. Johnson puts her arm around my shoulders
& tells me to take my time. Her semester ended

a few weeks ago, & she won't teach
a summer session for a few weeks more.

I decide to organize the books in their living room library
while I wait for Dre to come home.

Clear steps: organize the books by genre,
then alphabetize them on the dining room table.

Since they moved here, Dr. Johnson has let me borrow
lots of books. Let me borrow games,

& Wi-Fi, & a cup of sugar if Mami was baking.
& I wish I could borrow time,

or space, or answers. I tell Dr. Johnson this,
& she pat-pats my hand.

"Just let yourself mourn, sweetie.
You can't run from what hurts you,

or like a dog smelling fear,
that grief will just keep chasing with ever-sharp teeth."

I go back to stacking books.
Orderly. Logical. Safe.

Later that day, when Ma gets home
I search her face for signs of how she feels.

She is as polished as when she left this morning.
But her face is pale, & her hands tremble

when she hands me her purse. She does not say
how much it must have cost her to smile today.

At six o'clock, Mami & I go to a grief counseling session.
It's the third time the neighborhood association's invited us.

There's a Spanish-speaking counselor & a priest.
Mami grips my hand, her pale cheeks paler.

The room is full. & even before anyone speaks,
there are several people silently weeping.

Pain hums in the room, like a TV on mute,
& there is no knob to turn it off.

The counselor asks us about loss.
I do not know how to say in Spanish:

I am a graceful loser.

Many times. Many things. I've made mistakes
that lost the match.

Who were Mami & I playing against? Did God win?
Did Papi lose? I know we did.

How could the stakes have been so high?
We are sitting in a circle.

One man says both his parents were on the flight;
they were returning to Santo Domingo to retire.

A young woman with straight hair that hangs to her waist
says her husband had just got back from fighting overseas;

he was going to visit his sister
& the place where he was born for the first time in twenty years.

We hear about a little girl going to visit her grandmother,
about a young couple flying to their honeymoon.

The stories hang in the room like twinkling lights
that I could touch. Over 80 percent of the people on the flight

had connections to the island. Returning.
& when it's Mami's turn to talk, in a soft voice she simply says,

"My husband travels back every year.
I feel as if I lose him again every morning I wake up."

Anger swirls up my chest, gets tangled with the words
I had meant to say. Mami's pain seems hungry.

& for the first time I wonder if now that Papi's dead,
will she learn what I knew? What I haven't been able

to talk to her about for over a year, because I didn't want
her hurt? Because I was afraid of the kind of change

these secrets would rain on our lives.

& if she doesn't find out, does that mean the only person
in my family who knows Papi's secret is me?

When it's my turn to speak, I bite the insides of my cheek.
The only thing I give the circle is a tight smile & shrug.

On silent accord, Mami & I agree, we will not go back.
The emotions at the group session

took up every vacancy in our body
& we have no room no room no room left.

My old chess coach calls when we get home
after the grief session. I'm doing dishes,

cleaning plates Mami & I filled with food but never ate from.
My hands are soapy when Mami hands me the phone.

Coach Lublin's voice is gentle, soothing;
it's the voice he uses when a newbie

loses a tournament to a kid half their age.
"Yahaira, we are all thinking of you."

Coach & I worked together for two years.
He seemed unsurprised when I quit the chess team,

as if he'd always known I was not truly interested.
He always smiles at me in the hallway

& invites me to drop by training sessions
but has never pressured me to rejoin the team.

When I hear his voice

my heart squeezes, a wrung-out sponge,
& I wonder what will happen to the phone

if I drop it into the filled sink. Will it float on suds
or be weighed down to the bottom?

How does the water learn to readjust around the new object?
Could we nestle the phone in rice, revive it into ringing again?

Mami looks up sharply from the table
& gives me her *look*.

"Thank you, Coach," I say to his kind remarks.
Who knew death must be so damn polite?

Our apartment has plastic-covered leather sofas,
windows with frilly curtains;

my mother decorates with wide sashes,
color-coded to match the season.

There's a small courtyard out back
where we held summer barbecues for the family

& neighbors. Unlike most of my friends' families,
Papi & Ma owned our apartment in the co-op.

Bought it when they found out
Mami was pregnant with a girl.

Papi said his queens needed a castle
& Morningside Heights would provide.

More & more, I sit on the fire escape
just to get a chance to breathe.

Our house these days is a choked-up throat.
I cannot exhale myself out the front door.

This is no castle. It's an altar to a man,
a National Geographic shrine;

the house is a living sadness, & as Mami walks
its halls at night, even the floorboards weep.

Fifteen Days After

It's Saturday.

After three p.m.

I lie in bed.

The doorbell rings.

Maybe Mami will get it.

Footsteps coming down the hall.

Soft padding
that doesn't belong

to Tío Jorge or Mami.

Soft murmurs outside my door.

More than one person
came inside.

Mami's quivering voice
& another tone more sure.

My door's pushed open.

I keep my eyes closed.
If they are intruders

I hope they steal everything,
especially the weight on my chest.

I hear sneakers
thump on the ground.

Then a body settles on my bed.
"Move over," Dre says.

She must have come over
with Dr. Johnson,

otherwise she would have ducked
through the window.

I am right; I hear Dr. Johnson's
measured murmur cutting through
my mother's choked voice.

Dre puts her arms around me.
& it's the first time I've let myself be held
since Papi died.

When Dre grabs the bottle of acetone
from on top my dresser I'm surprised.
If it weren't for me, the only decoration
on her nails would be specks of soil.
But it's not her nails she's concerned with.
She takes a little ball of cotton
& begins removing the polish from mine.
Despite having done the same for Mami's nails
yesterday, it's only then I notice,
I've bitten the color off my own.
When both my hands
are clean & she's filed the nails down for me,
I grab her face. Her eyes are calm.
My old-soul girlfriend. Always watching.
Always watching out for me.
We share a breath before I kiss her,
before I bite back the hitch of tears.

Positive identifications have been made,
& Papi's gold-tooth smile was among them.
Tío Jorge & his wife,
Tía Mabel, show up at 4:05 p.m.
My mother's sister, Tía Lidia,
& my cousin Wilson show up at 4:32.
My father's cousins, who work at the billiards,
show up at 5:12.
The family comes with food, with Bibles,
with worry sewn into the creases of their foreheads.
There is no music playing.
The men talk quietly in the living room
& sip Johnnie Walker.
When Tía Lidia & Mami go to her room to pray,
Tía Mabel appoints herself the general of logistics,
doing the things that Ma has been unable
or unwilling to do.
She calls a cousin about flowers,
a childhood neighbor about casket costs.

She calls a church a few blocks away
to have his name read at morning mass for a week.

She calls a relative in the Dominican Republic,
is quiet a long time while someone on the other end speaks.

There is a call made to *El Diario* newspaper
about publishing an obituary.

My cousin Wilson sits on hold with the airline,
trying to see when we can claim what is left.

The other women come back from the bedroom.
Mami's eyes are dry & hard.

Discussion turns to burial plots
& whether or not the remains should be taken to DR.

My father was the one who always threw the get-togethers
& even in death, he brings us all home.

Tio Jorge breaks away from the men
when he sees me standing

in the living room doorway,
swaying on my feet.

He leads me to my father's favorite chair,
awkwardly pats back my hair. I curl into his hand.

Tio Jorge & Tia Mabel do not have children
but they would have made great parents.

Tio Jorge knows how to listen.
Even if all he hears is silence.

We sit like that a long while.
Him patting my hair, me breathing in

his familiar cologne.
I trust he hurts

how I hurt. I trust he knows I hurt
without my having to say so.

Halfway through the discussion
of funeral arrangements

I heave up from Papi's chair.
Walk to his old-school record player,

grab one of his favorite artists,
& queue the music.

My uncles go quiet,
my aunt shushes someone on the phone,

I lean back in his chair
& close my eyes.

One of Papi's favorite bachata songs
lifts itself into the room. It's about lost love,

& although it's a breakup song,
the lament to not think, to not cry,

to not hurt for another man the singer
feels like it could be speaking to this moment.

Before the song is over
Mami slams her hand on the disc.

The music stops midnote.

It seems fitting, I think.
To end right in the middle.

She doesn't have to tell me
music is inappropriate for mourning.

I only needed it for a second
to remember a time before this one.

Tia Mabel
asks Mami

where Papi
will be buried

as we're seated
around the kitchen table

picking out
a picture

to laminate
for mourners.



(I have begun making lists in my head.
Of all the things I don't want to forget about Papi.

If someone asked my biggest fear,
it would be that. Forgetting his calloused hand

with a fingertip he chopped off in DR.
His gold tooth that blinked in the light.

His big laugh that used to make me smile,
even if I was mad at him.

I try to find a picture that captures all of this,
Papi in motion. Papi in space. Papi gilded.

Papi, the big hot boiling sun
we all looked to for light.

I want to forget this whole past year
& remember only the good things.

Not a single photo captures exactly what I need,
& I shove away picture after picture—)



At Tía's words

Something flashes in Mami's eyes that isn't really sadness; her hands tighten against her snatched waist.

She hugs herself hard. Neither of them looks at me when she says:

"His real family is here. What's left of him will be buried here."

I look at my mother, as if seeing her for the first time. She sounds angry. I try to see if she knows what I know.

But Tía Mabel makes a sharp sound, & I swing my eyes in her direction.

Tía Mabel's mouth looks like a cliff words want to tumble over, but she clamps her lips tight & pulls the sentences off the edge.

Tío Jorge shakes his head.

"Yano always wanted to be buried back home, Zoila."

Mami doesn't even look in his direction.

"He will not be buried there. I am his wife."

My heart feels like it's pounding in my chest.

Does she know? Does she know? Do they all know?

Tío shakes his head & takes a folder out from his briefcase.

"His wife you might be, Zoila, but you are not his will."

He sets a document on the kitchen table.

My mother picks up the papers

as if they will origami themselves into fangs.

Then she laughs, "So *this* he planned for?"

"& . . ." Tío shoots a glance at me.

"The other matter, too, Zoila. You agreed."

Mami puts the papers down without reading, straightens & smooths them as if fixing a boyfriend's tie.

Mami turns her back to us, stands by the window.

"He was ours first. & he will be ours last."

Pero if this is what he wanted, then take him back. But we won't be the ones there to see him buried."

I want to agree with Mami, but I can't.
The part of me that is my father's daughter,

that sat on his lap & laughed. That had her hand
patiently guided by his, that girl knows it isn't so simple.

"If Papi is buried in DR, I want to be there.

He died alone & afraid, without family around.
Without anyone who knew him. He was probably thinking of us.

How can we put him in the dirt alone
& not even go to say a prayer over his grave?"

Although she still has her back to me, Mami straightens.

The longer I speak, the more unthinkable the scenario.
Mami can't possibly imagine she & I wouldn't go.

Papi wasn't perfect, but he didn't deserve this.
& we deserve to say goodbye.

Her eyes are watery when she turns to me,
but her voice is solid ice.

"Yahaira. Your father was no man's saint.
Not even if I dropped dead this moment, would I let you

touch foot on the sands of that tierra. Get that thought
right out of your head. Grave or no grave."

I press my mouth tight to keep my quivering lip to myself.
& I look at my mother & smile.

Never, ever let anyone see you sweat.
& if my mother paid attention

at a single one of my matches
she knows: when Yahaira Rios smiles

just before she makes a move,
you better watch the fuck out.

Mami, is a good woman, a good woman.
Mami is smart & shows up to school conferences,

Mami is a good woman, a good woman.
she works hard & always makes dinner.

Mami is a good woman, a good woman.
She never forgot to pick me up from school,

Mami is a good woman, a good woman.
she sewed my sweaters when I pulled a button,

Mami is a good woman, a good woman,
mended the holes I tore in my new jeans.

Mami is a good woman, a good woman,
she buys thoughtful presents & kisses loudly,

Mami is a good woman, a good woman,
& I know I failed her.

Mami wanted a girl
she could raise in her own image, & I came forth

a good girl, a good girl, but so much of me
when I was younger seems crafted

from my father's spit, as if he shone
a light on her womb & pressed a fingerprint
onto my forehead, baptized me his alone;

I have words that I have kept secret from Mami,
words a better daughter would have said.

I am my father's daughter, a bad daughter,
a bad daughter to a great woman.

The thing I learned
about my father

is like a smudge
on an all-white dress.

You hope if you don't
look at it, if you

don't rub your finger
in the spot then maybe

it won't spread. Then maybe
it will be unnoticed.

But it's always there.
A glaring fault.

Papi had another wife.
I found the marriage certificate.

The date on the form
was a few months after

my parents' own marriage
here in the States.

& as if to ensure
that anyone who stumbled

across this envelope
got it right, there was also

a small picture included. My father
with a beautiful brown woman

with long dark hair,
both of them in all white

as she carried a bouquet,
smiling up into his face

while he stared steadily
& seriously at the camera.

My father had another wife,
& I know my mother

could not have known.

Could not have been the type

to stay, while her husband strayed
year after year after year.

This other woman,
the reason my father left me,
left us broke trust ignored
the family he left behind.

& when he returned last summer,

I didn't know how to look
him in the face & pretend.

So it was easier not to look at him at all.
When the only words I owned

were full of venom, it seemed better
to stop speaking to this man

since the only option was to poison us all.

CAMINO ✦ YAHAIRA

Nineteen Days After

I haven't talked to El Cero since he last approached me,
but today, as I'm squeezing the water from my hair,
he comes out from behind the trees.

Vira Lata was chewing on some bones as I left the house
& didn't join me on this trip to the water,
but still I scan the tree line hoping to see him napping in the
shade.

A small patch of short curly hair springs up
from the neck of El Cero's shirt. I am reminded
he might smile boyishly, but he is not a boy.

I am glad I am near home,
that there are houses beyond the clearing.
Because in this moment, I am a girl a man stares at:

I am not a mourning girl. I am not a grieving girl.
I am not a parentless girl. I am not a girl without means.
I am not an aunt's charity case. I am not almost-alone.

None of those things matter.

He approaches, wide-mouth smiling.

"I have my motorbike." He points. "Want a ride home?"

He wraps his hand around my wrist.

I snatch my arm away as my
cell phone starts ringing.
I scramble to grab the phone from my back pocket.

Tía's name flashes on the screen.

"¿Aló, Tía?" I back away from El Cero.

Tía does not say one word

but I hear the tears in her sharp breaths.

"They found him. I just got word that four days ago
they found what is left of him.
& they have decided to bring him home."

I murmur to Tía but know she cannot hear me.
A body means there is no miracle to hope for;
dead is dead is dead. For four days I didn't know.

You did know, I tell myself.

We knew there were no survivors.
But somehow this proof sledgehammers my heart.

Someone needs to light the candles,
to call the funeral home & contact his friends.
Someone needs to make flower arrangements & call a church.

& the only someone is me. I put the phone in my back pocket.
Confronting El Cero face-to-face. "Whatever you want from me,
forget it. I have nothing to give you."

It makes me sick that I find out this news
here, in this place I love, with a man
I am growing to hate.

I rush away from him, but not before I hear him say:
"But, Camino, you owe me more than you think,
& hasn't it always been about what I can offer you?"

When I get home, Tía has lit candles.
Although he was not her brother,
I can't imagine what she must feel.

I've known my father my whole life.
She knew my father all of his.
Tía was a healer's apprentice as a child,

seven years old, and in the room when Papi was born,
years later saw him fall in love with my mother.
She was the first person to hold his child.

Even when he came to visit
this house he paid for & updated,
Papi treated Tía like an older sister:

so much respect for how she kept the house,
for the beliefs she had,
the decisions she made regarding my well-being.

They were friends. But until this moment
I have not thought of what she's lost.
He was like her brother. Besides me, her only family.

& on this day that ends all hope
we hold each other close thinking of a man
& all the people that must live on without him.

Tia tells me she has heard rumors.

She is speaking to me the next morning
as we await news regarding Papi's body.

Her hands pluck the feathers off a chicken.

She is methodical, her fingers fast along the fluff
that she drops into a plastic bag in the kitchen sink.

The big machete that is never far from her side
catches the light through the window; it glints at me
& I wish I could carry it with me.

Tia tells me both Don Mateo & the woman who sells fruit
have mentioned seeing El Cero waiting for me after school,
or walking from the beach soon after I've left it.

She says the Saints have whispered caution in her ear.
I take a deep breath, I want to tell Tia it's all true.
That I'm afraid of the thing El Cero wants to ask of me.

Her voice is stripped of any emotions.
But if fingers can be angry,
hers must be wrathful; she plucks in hard snatches.

"I raised you smart. Right, girl?"
This is not a question she actually wants answered.
I can tell by how fast she speaks.

Tia's anger now sounds like it could be directed at me.
That thought puts a staying hand
on the words that were going to leap from my lips.

"I raised you clean & fed,
even when my feet were soiled,
when my own stomach rumbled. Right, girl?

I grew you up for a future
different than the one most girls
around here are allowed.

Choices. Did I not do everything
to provide you choices?"
The feathers bulge in the bag,

& I wish I was just as light.
But I feel weighed down,
her words turned to stones. .

Tia thinks I have been inviting El Cero's attention.
Somehow his stalking has turned into
something I must have done.

The chicken is nearly naked.

Raw & puckered, dressed in saggy skin.
A feast for our hunger,
a place to gnash our teeth

since neither one of us can bite at the world.

I wish I could tell Tia
that El Cero won't leave me alone.
I haven't done anything wrong

or encouraged him in any way.
He just shows up, grinning,
waiting.

I wish I could tell Tia
I don't know what to do. That
I'm scared he'll corner me.

I wish
I could tell Tia, but what would
Tia do if she knew? Tia is older,

with little money. She is
respected in the neighborhood
& beloved by the people to whom

she offers care, but El Cero occupies
a world of men who care little of healers,
& even less of the girls

who represent little more than dollar signs.
Don Mateo is old. Tio Jorge does not know me.
There is no one to stop El Cero. Anymore.

What would El Cero do to Tía
if she tried to stand up to him?
I cannot even think the thought.

I am from a playground place.
Our oceans that we need for fish
are cleared so extranjeros can kite surf.

Our land, lush & green, is bought
& sold to foreign powers so they can build
luxury hotels for others to rest their heads.

The bananas & yucca & sugarcane
farmed & harvested, exported,
while kids thank God for every little scrap.

The developed world wastes gas,
raises carbon emissions & water levels
that threaten to disappear us in a single gulp.

Even the women, girls like me,
our mothers & tías, our bodies
are branded jungle gyms.

Men with accents pick us
as if from a brochure to climb
& slide & swing. & him?

El Cero? He has his hand in every pocket.

If you are not from an island,
you cannot understand
what it means to be of water:

to learn to curve around the bend,
to learn to rise with rain,
to learn to quench an outside thirst

while all the while
you grow shallow
until there is not one drop

left for you.

I know this is what Tia does not say.
Sand & soil & sinew & smiles:
all bartered. & who reaps? Who eats?

Not us. Not me.

Tia doesn't believe girls should wear all black.
I was thirteen the first time she let me buy a black dress
I wanted for my middle school graduation.

It's this same black dress I pull out from the closet
to wear to the meeting with the priest.
It still fits. I slide on the straps.

I pull on black stockings despite the heat outside.
Tia doesn't blink when she sees me.
She just turns around so I can button her white blouse.

She wears a white head wrap too.
I know the priest will raise a brow, but Tia doesn't care.
She is armored in her Saints,

& they make her brave, or reckless, or are they the same?
All white like this shows undue devotion to the Saints,
& our priests don't want to know what's practiced in secret.

Tia & I stare at the mirror. The two of us framed in copper.
Tears pool in her gaze & I immediately wipe them
where they collect in the wrinkles around her eyes.

She doesn't flinch at my hand. She curls into my palm.
Tia doesn't believe girls should wear black.
But if I wasn't a woman before today,

I think I am one now.

When I ask Tía

if my father's brother, Tío Jorge,
will be coming with Papi's body,

she hesitates a long moment
& fingers a loose fringe
that's fallen free from her head wrap.

"Bueno, te digo que no sé."

But her tense shoulders
seem to know more

than she's telling me.

I look at her sideways
& we walk arm in arm into the church.

"How are we to plan a funeral
if we don't know who's coming?
Will people be staying with us?

How much do we need to cook?"

A hundred other questions puff into dandelions,
wisp up in the air between us

but Tía just shakes her head
& doesn't make a wish
on a single one.

In the middle of the night,

Tía shakes me awake from a dream
where I am wandering New York City

screaming my father's name.

At first, I think I must have been screaming out loud,
but when my eyes adjust to the dark

I see Tía is carrying her healer's bag.

I get dressed quickly in jeans & sandals.

Do not bother putting on a bra, or brushing my hair.

I can tell by the worried way she rifles inside her bag
that this is an emergency situation.

As if we don't have enough to deal with.

When we step outside the house, a young man waits.

Shadows darken his face, but as I get closer,

I see it's Nelson, Carline's boyfriend,

who made eyes at her since she was five

& we would all splash each other in the ocean
like we'd discovered a personal water park.

He must have been recruited to fetch us.

I do not ask what is wrong. There is only one reason.

We walk the uneven streets in the dark,

Tia's white clothing a splash of brightness against the unlit night.
Good thing we know this ramshackle neighborhood
as well as we know the webs between our fingers.

She stops in front of the yellow house,
& there must be a power outage
because inside is pitch black

except for a couple of candles burning in the window.

Carline's maman opens the door.

Although it is dark, I can see the one-room house

is swept clean & scrubbed cleaner.

But still too small for all the people
we must fit inside:

Maman & Carline's father,
an older man who rarely smiles,
& Tia & myself, & Nelson.

& Carline. & Carline's babe attempting to push itself out.
Carline's face is red & sweaty; she is sprawled
on a faded couch, her hands clutching her belly.

I towel off Carline's forehead.

Tia asks Carline's Maman questions
in her calm curandera voice;

"When did the contractions start?"

"When was the last time she went to the clinic?"

"Has her water broken? How long ago?"

Carline clutches my hand tightly,
& I attempt to circle out her worries with my thumb.
If there is anything to be done, Tia will do it.

Carline should be in a hospital,
but Maman says the babe is coming too fast,
& they panicked thinking of the logistics.

It is not an easy thing to do,
for a Haitian parent to bring their child
to a Dominican hospital to give birth.

There is already a lot of tension around
who here deserves care; I cannot fault Maman
for being too afraid.

Tia's questions are asked as firmly as the hand
she presses onto Carline's belly; as a curandera,
Tia is fierce, channeling something beyond herself.

I unfold long white sheets & wrap them around cushions
to protect the space where Carline will give birth.
I use the flashlight on my phone to get my bearings in the house.

Tia pulls her up by the elbows & bears Carline's weight,
then prays & calls protective spirits into the room;
I reach into her bag & grab the tea made from thyme;
Carline's father looks stern, but I see his hands tremble
as he settles them on the back of a chair.
He mumbles under his breath in Kreyòl,
& I wonder if he too is praying.

Tia settles Carline more comfortably
on the birthing bed I've made. She guides Carline to breathe,
to push, to wait. I set thick towels on the floor.

Nelson rushes to help me;
his fingers jerk sharply as we straighten the space.
Fear clouds the room, a thick fog,

but Tia's calm voice is a flame cutting through it.
I switch places with Tia, & my arms grow heavy
where I sit behind Carline, holding her up;

I am sweating almost as hard as she is.
I try to breathe deeply as I hold my best friend up.
I try not to think of all the ways I know premature labor can go
wrong.

Tia is red in the face & her eyes are weary,
although you can't tell by her steady movements.
"One last hard push, niña, the baby is crowning."

Carline doesn't seem to have any more energy.
She is panting hard, her eyes squeezed shut,
& I am worried if this is not the last push—

"Come now, Carline," I whisper.
"You did not carry this baby all these months,
not to see it into the light. Con fuerza!"

I wipe the sweaty hair at her forehead,
& she weeps into the crook of my arm,
but she pushes. & pushes. & pushes:

the small body plops down into Tia's waiting hands
like a wrinkled fruit from a shaken tree.
The baby boy is tiny. Quiet.

Tía is a woman woven of miracles;
the reason people who are afraid of her
& her magic still call for the worst emergencies
is because Tía's a woman who speaks to the dead,
who negotiates with spirits, who loosens their fingers
when they clutch around the neck of someone she wants to
live—

It doesn't always work—I know personally
sometimes Tía is too late; sometimes the request is too great
& Tía's bargaining not enough; sometimes

Tía is only a healer woman with calloused hands,
a commanding voice, with ointments & tea,
this woman who holds a baby not her own,

says, "Ven mi'jo ven."

Sometimes, Tía is more:
she calls forward his life when it would retreat,
& the room holds its breath as if we can gift it to the child.
& Carlina weeps, & Tía prays & curses & coaxes
a child to breathe breathe breathe
pressing her two fingers against his chest
beating his heart for him oblivious
to the slick of his body & blue of his lips
to the collective sob of the room
to the spirits who would greet him on their side of the veil.

Tía takes air into her mouth
& pushes it into the child's mouth:
does this again & again
from her body to his until it seems impossible
this bringing forth of life
when death is so steadily stalking into the room

& then the baby inhales a deep gasp
just as the electricity returns to the barrio

& the small house becomes filled, brilliant bright.

I have been so entrenched
in death, & drowning, & funerals,
that this seems an amazing thing

to see this babe clutch at the air.

To see this child who should not be here
not only here but *here*.

Through my own tears, I see all of us are crying.
& tired Carline holds the child close
to her breasts & grips my hand.

Tia gives instructions of herb teas to brew,
ointments to make, & advice on latching.
She'll come back if Carline needs help swaddling.

Maman hugs me to her chest as we are leaving;
she says thank you & thrusts some pesos at me.
She says she will wash the sheets & return them.

Carline holds her child; Nelson holds his hat.

The old man does not say a word,
but tears trail down his cheeks as he walks us to the door.

CAMINO ✈ YAHAIRA

They've made a memorial
outside of Papi's billiards.

Under the green lights,
where the bouncers stand,

there's a blown-up picture
of Papi smiling,

holding a glass (of what I imagine
is whiskey) out to the camera.

Dre insisted on coming with me,
& she is a sure presence behind me.

I kneel & touch my hand
to the gifts people left in Papi's honor:

flower wreaths, so many flowers,
although Papi always said

"Why pay money
for a thing that will die in a week?"

The knickknacks build a lump
the size of a billiard cube inside my throat:

A lottery ticket,
a bottle of shoeshine polish,
a small Dominican flag,
a baseball card of Robinson Canó,
a little figurine
of a man dressed in red & black.

In history we learned
the Greeks made sure to die
with a coin in their pocket
to ensure their spirit could pay

for their way to the other side;
remembering this, I give Papi

the only kind of safe passage I have to offer.
I kneel on the cold, hard concrete

& fish the chess piece from my pocket.
Set her, the polished black piece,

right by a burning candle:
a queen to guard him on his way.

Papi's billiards has always been
a gathering place, & as I stand outside of it

I remember my last time here. It was after a match;
Papi took me to his pool hall to celebrate.

He rarely did that, said billiards
wasn't a place for children, especially not his child.

But on this night he wanted to show off
my trophy to his employees & friends.

Surprised me with a cake & a glass of Coke
he had splashed with a little bit of rum.

He pressed a code into the jukebox
so that bachata songs blared out for free all night.

My father left the country a few weeks later.
I stopped playing chess soon after.

I am quiet on the train ride home.
My head against Dre's shoulder

as her breath puffs softly into my hair.
She knows I hate riding the train alone;

it's one of the reasons I think
she pressed to come with me tonight.

The last time I played chess
I won, against a boy named Manny

who I'd played against before—
he always smiled at me across the table,
held my hand too long when we shook
& took both his wins & losses gracefully—

but this is not a story about Manny;
this is a story about winning,

about feeling on top of the world,
of feeling like a star had risen inside me

& maybe was shining on my face
or glittering off my trophy last summer

as I stood on the train station platform
& prepared to go home.

Papi was in DR at the time, so I attended the match alone.
It was daytime & the train was packed

& I got on with my back to a man
who leaned against the train doors—

& when I felt a squeeze on my leg
I thought it was an accident & when I felt fingers

float up my thighs I thought I must be mistaken
& when he palmed me under my skirt openhanded

I dropped my trophy but did not scream,
did not make a scene did not curse him out

there was no strategy no alternate plan
no way to win, there was just me stuck,

& being felt up on a public train racing
northbound heart breath

sick lost anger has no place on the board
I was impotent in my feeling never let them

see you sweat dripped on my brow

I don't think I liked it. It lasted more than one stop
more than two more than three

do you know what I mean
my body was not my body could not

be mine he got off at Ninety-Sixth Street
I did not pick my trophy off the train floor I did not cry

until I got home until Dre came in through
the window & saw me trembling & held me

close & did not ask me anything but still knew
still must have known how she ran the bath

& folded my skirt into the farthest corner
of my closet & we never spoke of it

I did not cry over it again but I knew
I needed to speak to Papi

I hoped he'd have some words of wisdom,
some response. But when I called he did not answer.

Once I unfroze from what happened on the train,
I tried frantically to reach him.

I wanted to speak to the most protective
man in my life; I wanted him to undo it somehow.

I had a match in two days, & I wanted to tell Papi
I didn't want to go. I needed a break.

I don't know why I felt like I needed his permission.
After three days with no reply,

I opened the cabinet where Papi put
all his business papers in a folder.

But the only papers were for the billiards here.
Nothing with a Dominican area code.

Then at the bottom of the cabinet,
half hidden by other files, covered in dust,

was the sealed envelope.

I knew I should put it back.

I knew it wasn't what I was looking for.
But I opened it anyway.

After what I found & what happened on the train.

I skipped two tournaments.

Ones that had been difficult to qualify for.

But on the evening of the third tournament.

Papi called me huffing & puffing.

He'd received an email from the tournament commission.
Disqualifying me from any other summer matches.

When I answered the phone.

Papi did not ask if everything was okay.

I did not ask why he read that email
but none of my texts, replied to none of my phone calls.

He did not let me get a word in.

He didn't ask why I answered with so much anger.

& the truth is I don't think I would have told.

About the man & the hand up my skirt. In my panties.
About the certificate in the file cabinet that made my father a
liar.

But I'll never know. What I would have said.

Because Papi did not ask:

He only lectured me & told me he was disappointed.

After he hung up. I whispered into the phone.

All the ways that I was disappointed in him.

If Papi wanted my silence.

I vowed that day that he would get it.

When Papi came home.

A few weeks before school began back up.

He ranted & raved to Mami that I had grown stubborn.

He would walk into a room & yell I needed to grow up.

I would simply go into my room.

Or climb through Dre's window.

To escape having to look my father in the face.

Twenty-One Days After

It's the last day of school.

I walk through the school hallways

like an alien has crept into my body.

My arms don't work like they used to.

I try to raise them to pick up my report card.

I try to make them pick up a pencil as I sign myself out.

I try to open my locker to remove my books.

I try to keep them from trembling.

But they only shake lightly at my side,

& it's Dre who murmurs & reminds me

I can do this. Keep on breathing, I mean,

when it feels like the littlest thing is too much work.

I guess I keep hoping if I just don't move at all

it'll hurt less when the memory barges into me:

It has been three weeks.

I do not have a father anymore.

Insurance representatives for the airline come to the house.
Tío Jorge & Tía Mabel are already here.

Although Tío Jorge practiced law in the Dominican Republic,
I still think we should have a lawyer who practices here,
but no one listens to me.

The airline representatives open a folder

& list the initial findings from the National Transportation
Safety Board.

I make sure to memorize the name

of the organization that will investigate what happened.
When the reps are done, they look expectantly at us.

Tío Jorge grabs the report & walks to the kitchen window,
reading in the light of the setting sun. Mami looks at me

& I know she wants me to translate; she didn't catch every word.
"Dinero," I tell her softly. An advance payment, to be exact.

So many dollars they've knotted around my father's life.
"Un medio millón," Tío Jorge whispers.

No one else says a word. Mami begins to weep
while drilling a manicured nail into the wooden table

until the sound feels like it's puncturing
my ear, & I put my hand over hers.

The airline

representatives

say

grievance.

don't say

grieve.

say

unprecedented.

don't say

crash.

say

mechanical failure.

don't say

dead.

say

pilot error.

don't say

dad.

say

insurance policy.

don't say

papi.

say

advance compensation.

don't say

his name.

say

accident.

don't say

sorry.

say

Loss.

“say

“Sorry.”

I say:

"Say you're sorry."

Things you can buy
with half a million dollars:

a car that looks more like a space creature than

A designer platinum purse
to carry a small dog. A small dog.

A performance by your favorite musical artist for your birthday.

A diamond-encrusted
bottle of Dominican rum.

A mansion. A yacht. A hundred acres of land. Houses, but not homes.

All four years of college
or beautician school & certificate.

Five hundred flights
to the Dominican Republic.

A half million Dollar Store chess sets,
with their accompanying boxes.

A hundred thousand copies
of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

Apparently a father.

Money like this

makes me think
of a game show.

& I wish

I could phone a friend

or use a lifeline.

I wish a smiling host

would pat my hand & have me
crowdsource the audience

for answers

on what to guess next.

A half million dollars
is more than my dad

ever made,
more than Mami or I

can begin to understand.

Tío Jorge says
we should still sue the airline.

Tío Jorge says
it might take years, but we are due a settlement.

Tío Jorge says
he can handle the finances.

Tío Jorge says
he can sell the billiards.

Tío Jorge says
he can open me a trust fund so the money is saved.

Tío Jorge says
he can hire a financial advisor, or accountant.

Tío Jorge says
we need to set money aside for taxes.

Tío Jorge says
this should help with the funeral expenses.

Tío Jorge says
we shouldn't tell the rest of the family.

Tío Jorge says—

Mami cuts him off:

"Jorge. You were your brother's consentido.

& I appreciate your advice.

But the one who needed it was him,

& you didn't offer it when he was here."

I look from Mami to Tío Jorge

trying to understand what isn't being said.

Did Mami know about the certificate?

Did Tío? Mami must realize how harsh she sounds
because she flattens her hands on her thighs.

"I just . . . what I mean is,
Yahaira & I will figure this out on our own."

I've never heard Mami
be so brisk with Tío Jorge.

Tia Mabel lowers her eyes;
she traces the lines of wood on the kitchen table.

Tío Jorge seals his lips like an envelope
& silently exits the room.

There is a community garden
around the corner

where I know I'll find Dre
if she's not home

or answering her phone.
That is her happy place,

& since she is mine
I walk there & sit on a bench.

I watch her long bent back,
the bright purple cap

pulled over her short hair
as she hums something

I'm assuming
is blaring through her ear pods.

Probably Nina Simone.
Dre loves Ms. Nina.

Will play her when she misses her father.
Will play her when she's angry.

Will play her when we see videos on social media
of another black boy shot another black girl pulled over

another kid in the Bronx stabbed outside a bodega.
Will play her while painting protest signs;

Dre plays Nina when two girls holding hands are jumped
or a kid who calls themselves them

is made fun of & it goes viral—
Dre turns to Nina.

Turns up "Mississippi Goddam."
Me? I want to bang my fist. I want to scream

the world apart from the seams.
But Dre? She gets a glint in her eye

like she's imagining she can repot us, all of us, onto a new planet
where we can grow with deep & understanding roots,

where we will rise & flourish into tree houses &
Nina will rain & Nina will breeze & Nina will be the sunshine;

I must make a noise at my imaginings
because Dre turns around, cocks her head,

pulls out her earbud & places it in my ear.
Goes right back to packing dirt around a bed of basil.

Birds flying high you know how I feel.

CAMINO ✈ YAHAIRA

Tía is angry whispering over the cordless phone again.
She steps onto the balcón as if the short distance
will stop me from overhearing.

When her call is done I go sit with her.
We rock in unison & don't turn on the porch light
as darkness falls & fireflies flutter over us like incandescent
halos.

Tía has never lied to me. From the beginning,
any questions I asked she answered.
Whether it was about sex, or boys, healing or the Saints.

I keep rocking next to her. Sometimes words
need time to form; the minutes like slabs
building a ramp out the mouth.

Tonight, Tía hums under her breath.
When she abruptly stops her rocking,
I slow my own chair's rhythm.

The porch floorboards echo a creak,
& it feels like the night is making room
for whatever Tía has to say.

I smack a mosquito against my chest.
My own blood smears on my skin.
I'm surprised I didn't notice the sting.

& yet I know,
whatever Tía is going to say
may not draw blood,
but I will feel it.

Tía says,

"The airline has offered money to preempt lawsuits.
A half-million-dollar advance to be split among dependents.
That was your Tío Jorge on the phone. This is complicated."

Tía says,

"I never wanted to lie to you, mi'ja.
Your father was a complex man.
He had many pieces of himself, & many crossroads."

Tía says,

"There is a girl in New York City, your same age.
Your same features. Your same father.
This girl was born two months after you were."

Tía says,

"Your father married hers before he married yours.
You can apply for money as one of his dependents, but
Zoila, the woman he married, might try to fight your claim."

Tía says,

"She, the wife, has connections at the consulate.
She's made it difficult for your father to request you.
He needed her citizenship papers to help obtain your visa."

Tía says

a lot more words, but I barely hear any of them.
I have a sister. I have a sister. I have a sister.
There is another person besides Tía of my blood in the world.

A truth
you did not want
to know

can rot & grow mold
in the pit
of your stomach,

can sour
every taste
you've ever had,

can cast a stench
so bad you forget
you've ever known

a sweet thing.

A truth you did not want
can put a collar around your neck

& lead you into the dark,
the places where all your
monsters live.

There is another girl
on this planet
who is my kin.

My father
lied to me
every day of my life.

I am not alone
but the only family
I have besides Tia
are all strangers to me.
I want to put my fingers
against my sister's cheek.

I want to put my face
in her neck & ask
if she hurts the way I do.

Does she know of me?
Would my father have told her?
Did she share

in his confidences?
While the whole while he lied to me?
Or is she the only one

who would understand
my heart right now?
If I find her

would I find a breathing piece
of myself I had not known
was missing?

On Tía's altar, there are all sorts of items.
a shot glass half-full of rum, nine vases of water.
There's a bright bouquet of yellow flowers;

A small cup of fresh coffee on the floor. Surrounding the altar
are photos; a black & white photo of her parents: her father,
the fisherman, & my grandmother,

a washerwoman from west of the island. My mother's
smiling face smiles up from the ground as well. Several
great-aunts & -uncles pose stiffly in formal clothing.

& underneath the white tablecloth
is a stack of bills I've snuck onto the altar.
My school tuition is one. It arrives every June,

& Papi pays it off in July. It's the charge for my first-quarter
schooling so I can attend classes in September.
The pesitos people pay Tía are not enough.

My heart thumps hard.
I press a hand to keep it inside.
How does an overeducated orphan

become an obstetrician
in a place where most girls
her age become pregnant

before tenth grade? But now
money is owed to me.
Tia says it could be mine.

How does a girl—*how do I*—
finish high school,
go to college in the US?

How do I watch
every single one of my dreams
flutter like a ribbon of bubbles

pop pop popping in the air. I don't.

"Tia, about the visa & the money,
Papi said my papers were in order."
Tia is cleaning red kidney beans for a moro.

She nods but does not say anything.

"Would I still be able to go to the States?
Tío Jorge could take me in, right?"
Tía's hands pause sifting through the bowl.

"Your father was not bringing you on his papers, mi'ja,
he was bringing you on his wife's.
It was with their combined income, as well as her citizenship,

that your papers would be approved.
She would have to sponsor you
for you to attain a visa & the ability to be a resident.

From what I know, Zoila is not a forgiving woman."
& I think about this wife. I think
I am not a forgiving woman either.

"What's his other daughter's name?" I ask.
Tia fishes through the beans, picking out
the old & wrinkled ones that hold no nutrients.

She is silent in her assessment of the good & bad,
the ones that are allowed to stay, the ones that must be tossed.
I imagine she is plucking through her words with that same
scrutiny.

"Yahaira. Your sister's name is Yahaira."

Twenty-Two Days After

Still reeling about this sister about the money.
about my father's secrets, I stop by Carline's house the next day.
The baby is asleep & Carline's eyes are tired,

but when she hugs me, I almost let myself cry
in the warmth of her arms even though
another crying child is the last thing she needs.

We sit on the couch & she does not let go
of my hand. "You already seem like a mother,"
I say, & she laughs, but I'm being honest.

"My breasts ache & I'm always thirsty.
Camino, a group of girls came by to see the baby;
they told me they've seen you at the beach with El Cero.

No me digas que es verdad." I squeeze her hand
before letting it go. "Camino, I would be the last person
to judge you. But El Cero is dangerous."

I nod. Of course he is.
She is not saying anything I don't know.
There is a reason my father paid him to stay away.

There is a reason he keeps circling back to me.
But how can I explain to Carline
something she cannot help me with?

It's just like with Tia; everyone has advice to give,
but all I have to offer her are more worries in response.
The baby's wail stops me from having to say anything.

"Just be careful, Camino.
Now come & greet your nephew."
I ask her if she's given him a name.

"The old women have told me not to,
since his breathing is still so shallow.
But I've decided to call him Luciano."

I hold my best friend's babe, &
I hold her hand as well.

He is premature, but he is loved,

& I know both Carline & I are praying
even though it may seem unlikely,
that that love will be enough.

When I next see El Cero in the neighborhood, I treat him like a
stray;
feed him crumbs of placating attention
that I hope will make him more pet than predator,

but will remind him not to howl at my door.
He always comes back. Pacing near me as I try to ignore him.
Today Vira Lata followed me to the beach.

He sits on my clothes in the warm sun
& keeps a lazy eye on El Cero. He is not
a good guard dog, but I'm still glad not to be alone.

I am packing up my things & El Cero speaks to me.

"Someone asked me for your address recently.
An old friend of your father's. At least he said he was a friend.
But I don't think he was a good man. I told him I didn't know."

I hear the other words El Cero does not say: I can give your
address

to anyone, I can call attention to you, what protection,
what protection, what protection is a loosely locked gate

& no father or man or trained sharp-fanged hound
to stop anyone from breaking entering.

El Cero cocks his head when I do not respond to him.

He lets a whistle loose through his teeth.

From the clearing, the one that I've walked since I was a child,
an older man comes forth. He has a scar above one eye

& smells like an open sewer that's been sprayed with cologne.

"This is the girl, the one you were asking about.

Camino, this is a friend of your father's."

El Cero hesitates for a second & then grasps my arms.

The man looks me up & down, rubbing his chin.

"I have a few questions, mi amor. Come sit in my car with me."

& all of a sudden I am not sad, or afraid.

I am rage bow-tied as a girl;

I unfurl, full of fury. I am yelling & I could not tell you what.

I wrench away from El Cero & push the man back hard;
my quick motion excites Vira Lata, who begins barking,
drawing the men's attention as I sprint away.

Angry tears, the first I've shed, stream down my face.

I feel as if I swam too close to a stingray;
my skin vibrates. Electric to the touch.

I turn my back on the beach. I run all the way home.

I rush home only to remember tonight is a ceremonial night.

Tia taught me to dance at the ceremonies.

To the drums of the santero. She taught me
a person moves not only with their body but with their spirit.

To the santero's chanting & the chanting of the others.

I watched Tia spin, the colorful beads
around her neck wet with sweat.

Oh! How her waist bent like a willow tree
during the onslaught of a storm.

I learned how low to the ground my knees could get,

how my back could roll & my chest could heave,
my wrapped hair was a plush throne
for the spirits to reign from.

Everyone knew this was a house blessed by saints. & although
a lot of people don't fuck with that kind of thing here,
they were always asking for Tia's remedios & jarabes;

for advice & prayer; for assistance with birthing their babies
when the doctors were too expensive, or when they'd been told,
"There's just nothing else we can do."

& when Tia hosts a ceremony, the crowd outside is legion.
She has a touch, they say, she has the Saints' ears.
Tonight the santero comes, & the practitioners do too.

In our small yard out back the drummers form a circle;
although we are grieving, the songs spring forth full of light.
There is something holy in the night air.

I push the air with my body as if pushing El Cero & his friends.

I pray myself free of pain as I spin in the circle.

I pray myself free of fear as I throw my arms out wide.

I pray myself free with head tosses, with bracelets jangling,

I pray myself free.

CAMINO ✈ YAHAIRA

Everyone in the house
is feeling some type of way.

& since it's only me & Mami,
what I mean is we are tiptoeing around.

Mami pads through the house
writing checks for bills

I didn't even know we had.
Mami is spending money

on a promise; she is spending money
we don't even truly have yet.

She ignores work, forgets appointments.
I do not recognize this reckless woman

who has taken residence in my mother's body.
But I also don't want her to leave

a place I know is safe. So I say nothing.
I make her lunch she doesn't touch,

& I climb through the Johnsons' window
when I need to hear noise around me.

If tension is a winged monster,
it's cast its feathers
on the roof of my house.

Twenty-Three Days After

Now that school's done, I walk the streets without purpose.
I walk far north along Riverside Drive.

Sometimes I walk down to Lincoln Center
so I can sit by the fountain.

I avoid dog shit & the people hanging on their stoops;
I ignore ice-cream trucks & hurled catcalls.

I put one foot in front of the other,
& every evening I land at Dre's front door.

Dr. Johnson has wet hands from washing dishes;
she sprays me with water when gesturing me in.

She wraps an arm around my shoulders.
Presses her chin to the top of my head.

I stand there for a second, then step away.
It is nice to be in a home

that feels the same way it did a month ago.
To eat dinner that has no sour reminders.

I let the noises of a whole family lull me into sleep.