

CAMINO ✈️ YAHAIRA

I know too much of mud.

I know that when a street doesn't have sidewalks
& water rises to flood the tile floors of your home,
learning mud is learning the language of survival.

I know too much of mud.

How Tía will snap at you with a dishrag if you track it inside.
How you need to raise the bed during hurricane season.

How mud will dry & cling stubbornly to a shoe.
Or a wall. To Vira Lata the dog & your exposed foot.
I know there's mud that splatters as a motoconcho drives past.

Mud that suctions & slurps at the high heels
of the working girls I once went to school with.
Mud that softens, unravels into a road leading nowhere.

& mud got a mind of its own. Wants to enwrap
your penny loafers, hug up on your uniform skirt.
Press kisses to your knees & make you slip down to meet it.

“Don’t let it stain you,” Tia’s always said.
But can’t she see? This place we’re from
already has its prints on me.

I spend nights wiping clean the bottoms of my feet,
soiled rag over a bucket, undoing this mark of place.
To be from this *barrío* is to be made of this earth & clay:

dirt-packed, water-backed, third-world smacked:
they say, the soil beneath a country’s nail, they say.
I love my home. But it might be a sinkhole

trying to feast quicksand

mouth pried open; I hunger for stable ground,
somewhere else.

This morning, I wake up
at five a.m. Wash my hands & face.
There is a woman with cancer,

a small boulder
swelling her stomach,
& Tía Solana needs my help to tend her.

Since I could toddle,
I would tag after Tía,
even when Mamá was still alive.

Tía & I are easy with each other.
I do not chafe at her rules.
She does not impose unnecessary ones.

We are quiet in the mornings.
She passes me a palm-sized piece of bread;
I prepare the coffee kettle for her.

By the time Don Mateo's rooster crows,
we are locking up the house, Tía's machete tucked into her bag.
The sun streaks pink highlights across the sky.

Vira Lata waits outside our gate.
He is technically the entire neighborhood's pet,
a dog with no name but the title of stray;

ever since he was a pup he's slept outside our door,
& even if I don't think of him as solely mine,
I know he thinks of me as his.

I throw him the heel of bread from the loaf,
& he runs alongside us to the woman with cancer,
whose house door does not have a lock.

Tia knocks anyway before walking in.
I do not furrow my brow or pinch my lips at the stench
of an unwashed body. Tia crooks her head at the woman;

she says I have a softer touch than she does.
I murmur hello; the woman fusses in response;
she is too far gone into her pain to speak,

& since she lives alone, we have no one to ask
how she's been doing. I rub a hand across her
forehead. It is cool, which is a blessing.

She settles down with a deep sigh the minute I touch her.

I bring the bottle of water Tia passes me
up to her lips; she sips with barely there motions.
It is said she was once a most beautiful woman.

I lift the blanket that Tia wrapped
around her the last time we were here
& press gentle fingers to her nightgown-covered abdomen.

Her stomach is hard to my touch.
Tía burns incense in all the corners
of the small house. The woman does not stir.

It is easy in a moment like this
to want to speak over this woman,
to tell Tía there is nothing more we can do,

to say out loud the woman is lucky
that her lungs still draw breath.
But I learned young, you do not speak

of the dying as if they are already dead.
You do not call bad spirits into the room,
& you do not smudge a person's dignity

by pretending they are not
still alive, & right in front of you,
& perhaps about to receive a miracle.

You do not let your words stunt unknown possibilities.

So I do not say that her dying seems inevitable.
Instead, I brush her hair behind her ear
& lay my hands on her belly—chanting

prayers alongside Tía
& hoping that when we leave here
Vira Lata, & not death, is the only thing that follows.

Tía is the single love of my life,
the woman I want to one day be,
all raised eyebrows & calloused hands,

a hairy upper lip stretched over a mouth
that has seen death & illness & hurt
but never forgets how to smile or tell a dirty joke.

Because of her, I too have known death,
& illness & life & healing.
& I've watched Tía's every move

until I could read the Morse code
of sweat beads on her forehead.
So, when I say I want to be a doctor,

I know exactly what that means.

This curing is in my blood.
& everyone here knows
the most respected medical schools

are in the United States.
I want to take what I've learned
from Tía's life dedicated to aid & build a life

where I can help others.

There have been many days
when Papi's check comes late,
& we have to count

how many eggs we have left,
or how long the meat will stretch.
I don't want Tía & me to always live this way.

I will make it.
I will make it.
I will make it easier for us both.



CAMINO ✈️ YAHAIRA

When you learn life-altering news
you're often in the most basic of places.

I am at lunch, sitting in the corner with Andrea—
or Dre, although I'm the only person who calls her that.

She is telling me about the climate-change protest
while I flip through a magazine.

Dre is outlining where she'll be meeting the organizers
& the demands they'll be making at city hall

when Ms. Santos's crackling voice
pushes through the loudspeaker:

*Yahaira Rios. Yahaira Rios.
Please report to the main office.*

I feel every eye in the cafeteria turn to me.
I hand the magazine to Dre, reminding her

not to dog-ear any of the pages
since it belongs to the library.

I grab a pass from the teacher on lunch duty,
but Mr. Henry, the security guard,

smiles when I flash it his way,

“I heard them call you, girl.
Not like you would be cutting nohow.”

I hold back a sigh. On the chessboard
I used to be known for my risk taking.

But in real life? I’m predictable:

I follow directions when they are given
& rarely break the rules.

I hang out every Saturday with Dre,
watching Netflix or reading fashion blogs

or if she’s in charge of our entertainment,
watching gardening tutorials on YouTube

(which I pretend to understand
simply because anything she loves

I love to watch her watch).

Teachers’ progress reports
always have the same comments:

Quiet in class, shows potential,
needs to apply more effort.

I am a rule follower. A person whose
report card always says *Meets Expectations*.

I do not exceed them. I do not do poorly.
I arrive & mind my business.

So I have no idea what anyone in the main office
could possibly want with me.

How could I have guessed the truth of it?
Even as teachers in the halls gasped as the news spread,

even as the main office was surrounded by parents
& guidance counselors. How could I have known then

there are no rules, no expectations, no rising to the occasion.
When you learn news like this, there is only

falling.



I replay that moment again & again,
circle it like a plane in a holding pattern.

How that morning, on the fifth day of June,
the worst thing I could imagine

was being lectured for my progress report
or getting another nudge to return to the chess club.

I didn't know then that three hours before,
as I'd arrived at school,

before lunch or Dre or the long walk down the school hallway,
the door to my old life slammed shut.



When I walk into the office, Mami is here.
Wearing chancletas, her hair in rollers.

& that's the move that telegraphs the play:

Mami manages a nice spa uptown
& says her polished appearance is advertisement.

She never leaves the house anything less
than Ms. Universe—perfect.

The principal's assistant, Ms. Santos,
comes from around her desk,

puts an arm around my shoulders.
She looks like she's been weeping.

I want to shake her arm off.
Want to shove her back to her desk.

That arm is trying to tell me
something I don't have the stomach to hear.

I don't want her comfort. Don't want
Mami here, or anything about what's to come.

I take a breath, the way I used to
before I walked into a room

where every single person
wanted to see me lose. “Ma?”

When she looks at me, I notice her eyes
are red & puffy, her bottom lip quivers,

& she presses the tips of her fingers there
as if to create a wall against the sob that threatens.

She answers, “Tu papi.”

The flight

Papi was on departs
without incident on most days, I'm told.

Leaves from JFK International Airport & lands
in Puerto Plata in exactly three hours & thirty-six minutes.

Routine, I'm told, a routine flight, with the same kind of plane that flies in
daily & gets a mechanical check & had a veteran pilot & should have

landed fine.

Mami says the panic hit most of the waiting families at the same time.
Here, in New York, with the Atlantic refereeing between us,

we knew much earlier. Thirty minutes after the plane
departed, it was reported that the tail had snapped,

that like some fishing, hunting creature
the jet plunged into the water

completely vertical, hungry
for only God knows

what—prey.

Sank.

I sign myself out of school.
Ignore Ms. Santos's condolences.

Mami is still crying.
We walk to my locker.

I leave my books in the cafeteria.
Mami is still crying.

I leave school without saying goodbye to Dre.
Mami can't stop crying.

Mr. Henry waves. I wave back.
Outside the day is beautiful.

Mami cries.
The sun is shining.

The breeze a soft touch along my face.
Mami is still crying.

It's almost as if the day has forgotten
it's stolen my father or maybe it's rejoicing at its gain.

Mami is still crying,
but my eyes? They remain dry.

I learn via text I am one of four students at school
who had been called to the office because of the flight.

In the neighborhood, las vecinas are on their stoops
in their batas & chancletas,

everyone trying to learn
what the TV may not know:

*Who was on the flight? Is it true everyone is dead?
Was it terrorists? A conspiracy de por allá? The government?*

When the women call out to Mami
she does not turn her head their way.

We walk from the school to our apartment
as if we are the ones who have been made ghosts.

The bodegueros & Danilo the tailor
& the other store owners

stand outside their shops
making phone calls as viejitos

wring their hands in front of their bellies
& shake their heads.

Here in Morningside Heights,
we are a mix of people: Dominicans

& Puerto Ricans & Haitians,
Black Americans & Riverside Drive white folk,

& of course, the Columbia students
who disrupt everything: clueless to our joys & pains.

But those of us from the island
will all know someone who died on that flight.

When we get to our building,
Doña Gonzalez from the fifth floor

calls out from her window,
pero Mami does not look up,

does not look sideways, does not stop
until we walk through our apartment door,

& then, as if pierced, she deflates,
slides down to the floor

with her head in her hands, & I watch
as the rollers slip free one by one, as her body shakes

& she unravels. I do not slide down to join her.

Instead, I put my arms underneath hers,
help her up to her feet & into her bedroom.

When the phone begins ringing
I answer & murmur to family.

I take charge where no one else can.





Last summer, when I learned my father's secret,
it was like bank-style gates descended on my tongue:

no words could escape. Those words I learned
must be protected at all cost. Even from my family.

Papi thought my silence was because of chess.
Because I was angry at his disapproval.

He never once imagined that my silence
was my disappointment in him. At what I'd found.

But although I felt he'd become a stranger,
I never stopped being my parents' steady daughter.



Who did her chores & bothered no one.
Even now, that is not a habit I know how to break.



I take down the trash. I microwave the leftovers.
I wrap myself tight around the feelings I cannot share,

an unopened present, a gift no one wants.

