CLAP WHEN YOU LAND

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HOT KEY BOOKS

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For my grand love, Rosa Amadi Acevedo,
& my sister, Carid Santos

In memory of the lives lost
on American Airlines flight 587

El corazón de la auyama,
sólo lo conoce el cuchillo.
—Dominican proverb

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," Tía'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 barrio *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.

Tía knocks anyway before walking in.
I do not furrow my brow or pinch my lips at the stench
of an unwashed body. Tía 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 Tía 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 Tía 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.

The Day

I am beginning to learn
that life-altering news
is often like a premature birth:

ill-timed, catching someone unaware,
emotionally unprepared
& often where they shouldn't be:

I am missing a math test.
Even though Papi will get in a taxi upon arriving,
I skipped my last two periods so I could wait at the airport.

I'll make up the exam tomorrow, I convince myself.
Papi's homecoming, for me, is a national holiday,
& I don't rightly care that he's going to be livid.

(He reminds me once a week he pays too much money
for my fancy schooling for me to miss or fail classes.
But he shouldn't fuss since I'm always on honor roll.)

I also know Papi will be secretly elated.
He loves to be loved. & his favorite girl waiting at the airport
with a sign & a smile—what better homecoming?

It's been nine months since last he was here,
but as is tradition he is on a flight the first weekend in June,
& it feels like Tía & I have been cooking for days!

Seasoning & stewing goat, stirring a big pot of sancocho.
All of Papi's favorites on the dinner table tonight.
This is what I think as I beg Don Mateo for a bola to the airport.

He works in the town right near the airfields,
so I know he's grumbling only because like his rooster
he's ornery & routinized down to every loud crow.

He even grumbles when I kiss his cheek thanks,
although I see him drive off with a smile.
I wait in the terminal, tugging the hem of my uniform skirt,

knowing Papi will be red-faced & sputtering at how short it is.
I search the monitor, but his flight number is blank.
A big crowd of people circle around a giant TV screen.