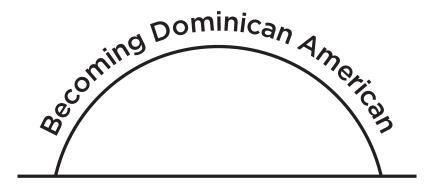


ISLANDS APART



Jasminne Mendez



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For Luz María

AT DAYBREAK

Alabama. 1984. Mami is very pregnant.

Open your eyes and breathe life into your belly.

Papi is working the night shift as a guard on base and his gaze is on the moonlight hovering over Mami's room in the barracks across the street. She came with him "por si acaso."

Gaze at the moonlight. Let the covers hover over your bare shoulders, curl up to the warmness of you, hum a birdsong quiet as dawn, and linger there a little bit longer "just in case."

Mami groans. A contraction.

She calls Papi but his name staccatos on the way out of her mouth. "Ben-ja-mín!" She hums. Another contraction. It lingers. She hums. It lingers. The contractions make her sing. Papi is nowhere to be found.

The lingering hum.

Sing into the spine of your body and wait until the alarm chimes.
Your bones bend, snap and staccato—the melody of the broken queuing up as you reach out and turn it off.
Will your limbs to hang idly. Like a a weeping willow tree.

Mami's voice crescendos. My two-year-old brother, Ben, wakes up weeping—his own like a willow tree. Mami moans. She rubs the pain to a stillness. My brother Ben weeps some more. Papi sits idly by, too far away to hear.

Mami becomes weary.

Become weary. Understand what it means to swell like water, rise out of bed anyway, groan with heavy fingers and wake your eyes free from the dirt of night. Smell the morning heat and speak into the silence of you. Let your feet float like mist off the side of the bed. Hollowed and wasted, decide to give your brutal body a chance. It's time.

Mami's melodies break the silence down the hall, echoing a call that prompts the staff supervisor to come to her aide. In English that cuts like grass, like an out of tune guitar, Mami explains to the white woman: "Baby! Es coming! Baby! ¡Estoy teniendo un bebé!"

"Baby," he says. "Are you all right?" Lie. Nod. Contemplate life, if only briefly. Breathe. It's coming, the pain that chokes you. Breathe. This can't last forever. Breathe. Cradle yourself and breathe.

I'm soon to arrive. Mami is in labor.

"Breathe," the woman tells her.

Mami knows this can't last forever. So she breathes. The woman leaves to get Papi.

Mami swallows the pain and waddles to the other side of the room, hands steady on the red brick wall,

and her water breaks like a river falling out of heaven,

as natural as heavy dew.

At daybreak, rush to the bathroom and let a warm river fall. Breathe. A sigh of relief. A sign of life. Hold your heavy hands steady.

Open a window and let the scent of jasmines smother.

Open a window and let the scent of jasmines smother you back to life.

The woman and Papi return.

Mami breathes a sigh of relief.

Their white and black and white and brown and black hands

smother themselves around Mami's waist to help her into the car. She breathes.

Two hours later, a sign of life emerges, they will name me Jasminne and I . . .

Make a grand entrance into the world.