

ISLANDS APART

Becoming Dominican American

Jasminne Mendez

"Dominican American Mendez tells her story in this compelling memoir. A strong collection of intimate essays . . . from an Afro-Latina perspective."

—Kirkus Reviews

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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 warmth 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
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.