

# Love Letter to an Afterlife

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Black  
Lawrence  
Press

For My Family, Mi Familia, La Flia

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# The Lost Santos

I.

Every summer, as a child, I am sent to you, Tía.  
And though I have no santos, I love yours.  
When the power goes out shadows walk  
beneath an oil lamp's burn; copper silhouettes cut air,  
and your stories wake the women watchers of night.  
Plump hands press against me, so I listen  
to your singing, to a song from across the Atlantic.  
Arms rock me, as you stuff women into my mouth.  
I drink spirits you pour into me; the rocking chair creaks  
beneath the weight of my tiny body wrapped  
in the white nightgown embroidered with my name.  
Blessings, I ask. Bendición, you echo.

II.

Our house is a home full of women.  
Full of honey and purple scarves to wrap thick hair in.  
Full of strings we attach to each other's toes and tug  
when we are too weak to rise in the dark.  
Full of water and old Cuban boleros so the moon  
remains forever like the rooster's dried foot.  
My aunt talks into the night. The women watchers rise  
from under the ground. We brush each other's wool hair,  
singing to santos overshadowing pictures of our dead.  
Hidden in closets, the faces of my relatives  
peer up at Saint Michael's foot—the tip of his sword  
a silver point pointing down at the earth.

III.

The women in my family whisper from within altars  
my aunt built, next to the santos she believed watched  
over us. I go to them now, blowing candles out,  
poking at powder crosses covering the floor.  
And though I drink the water from the Rose of Jericho,  
and eat the flowers blooming at night, they disappear  
when I place my aunt's picture beside them.

But at night I hear my Tía's voice, and sing.  
I sing even though oil lamps don't burn: the santos have left.  
Our house is bare except for altars I wipe clean,  
and the sound of water moving around my feet.

# Communion

I am eight.

Facing la Catedral Primada,

my digits out in front of me,  
launching birds into shadows

the palm trees cast;  
the color of God's face.

A woman nearby curses  
sins out of her head.

Leave my birds alone, or else  
I'll kill you

with my thoughts.  
My shadow, skinny and long,

lifts his penny loafer to stomp  
on birds I cast her way.

I try to punch my shadow flat,  
like boxers I've watched

in the TV box souls get stuck in.  
But it's safer here then

in the cathedral bells.  
I'm going to be a bird doctor

when Mama's shoes fit.  
I'll peel back the ears of ivory corn

like she showed me, throw kernels  
here, in this field that's a coral cage.

Mama's going to come live here.  
My sis & all of my friends.

But there's a woman divining  
my future, reading sins

in her hands. She knows  
what I hide inside.

Shut my eyes. Mute the mumbling.  
I peek through my fingers, see white

trees with monster feet grow all around  
& a boy who tells me to climb.

Up I go, behind him,  
to find glass lizards

hiding & if I eat the wafer  
waiting, today, it will be sweet mango

I've stolen to stuff myself with,  
and give to the boy

whose prayers I bump against,  
inside his mouth,

to save us. Birds grow  
seven colossal wings each.

Build my dreams far away  
from the cathedral bells,

they say, I'm like them. One day  
peacock feathers will grow from my back,

& an extra pair of eyes  
for the daggers thrown my way.

# They Say the Santos Sang Through You

*for Josefá Rivera Rincón*

A white room with white curtains, white walls.  
White tiled floor. The white sheets,  
crisp and clean, flat across the bed.  
You lie there, looking up at the ceiling.  
The white footsies to cover my steps.  
You mumble something about a missing glass  
or a song misplaced. I touch you  
with white gloves. So quiet.  
The nurse's white uniform. White tray  
beside your bed. Your white medical bracelet  
there. It hurts your wrist, you say.  
Your black skin against all that white.  
You still look so pale.  
Your white nightgown. Your white sweater.  
The island heat does not smother you.  
You call me by my aunt's name,  
move your eyes across the ceiling, back again.  
The white crescent moons of your nails.  
Your hands telling me your pocket book  
disappeared, asking where is your sister?  
The whites of your eyes, small and smaller,  
as you squint to take a better look at me.  
And you call my name. *Morena*, you say.  
The white of your teeth when you smile.  
The white of your teeth when you sing:  
*Under the water, I'll live. I live, counting the waves.*

# The Girl Who Taught Me to Scream

For the first time my mother left me—  
sitting in Montessori, in safety  
of the reading area. I remember  
feeling minutes or seconds spread  
when I wanted nothing but to crawl  
inside my mother. *Charlotte*, they spat.  
Charlotte colored walls, the floor, desks.  
She came to me, startling. Her red hair  
cropped above her eyes. She planted a kiss  
atop my head, drew her way into  
my hand, and led a crayon across  
my palm. How swift she was forced  
onto her feet. And stumbled. I looked  
for my mother for Charlotte locked  
in the map room, as her big, amber eyes  
bore into mine, as she pressed her nose  
against the glass, as her heart-lips blew  
a kiss for me, smiled a toothed smile.  
Screamed. Later, she circled the room.  
A game of duck duck goose. She eyed  
the giant maps hung on giant spools,  
and climbed a flattened globe. I saw her  
hands clutch a canyon. Knees buckle.  
The jagged stars along her sneakers.  
Her hair rising like fire.

## Two Trees

Two trees inside me.  
The Flamboyant's red petals. The Aromo's yellow buds.  
Their arms rub as I open my mouth.  
I've got la güira scraping my throat,  
El bandoneón blowing out my chest, and roads  
Marking my place at the center of this body  
Split into two countries. Roads. El Conde's amber  
Cobblestones, where Columbus's door is sealed shut.  
And Corrientes Avenue, its hundreds of books  
An old philosopher tells me to put down.

Home is a numbered house, cross on the ground,  
A country whose balconies I've tight-roped,  
Where I have worn a crown of flowers  
Lopsided on my head, and announced I was queen.  
I have slept in mausoleums, felt people I couldn't touch,  
Nor hold in the earth between my thumb and index finger,  
In the Ozama river, in El Tigre, whose currents sing  
Boleros, Milongas. I play on a piano. My home is:  
A pear-shaped flag, underneath my ribcage.

## The Mirage

Mama says in you, one day, I'll rest.

Woman, your indigo dress: skin of cotton.

I search for santos in the landscape of your moons.

You move, sashaying to a tune in your head.

The ocean break. My ear against you—

God. The sway of your everything glides by.

Taunt me with the black pearls you hold up.

You are soft, wet dirt, something to mold.

I tell Mama how each day you come like a song

I think I've heard. She warns me never to touch you,

unless to enter the devil's mouth.

How you make sun and shadow one.

I am six, praying to the invisible imprint

your hand has left across my face.

# My Barrio

## I.

From behind blue gates, Ensanche Luperon simmers: roosters flap against crisscross bars, howling at the Dominican sun; metal blinds open their eyelids and silhouettes slide behind them; vendors pedal over loose rocks and uneven asphalt, yelling goods they've handpicked, as keys jingle in lock after lock. El barrio rises to a sticky heat and breeze muting music seething out from car windows, conversations emanating from every pastel-colored home. Salt and dust lick the sweat between my joints, between my knuckles, behind my legs, the inside of my arms, the back of my neck. I grab a glass bottle from beneath the sink, wanting to go to the corner *colmado* and exchange it for a new one. But see I've never been able to smile at the neighborhood boys, their *pisst pisst* make my walk fall awkward and unsure beside my girlfriends' strut. The sway of their hips. Like merengue is stuck between their thighs. So *pa'lante* I don't go. I sit, sketchbook on my lap, all morning saying, *Buenas* to Ensanche Luperon.

## II.

Afternoons settle like the sigh from a lung. Everyone has showered morning off. We sit with the smell of papayas and milk, with the tiny saffron flower heads scattered beneath our brown feet, as boys swing sticks, girls dodge rubber balls. Chairs tilt back after the Flamboyans reach up and across the sky; their slender arms extend down the length of the street to knock on El Loco's door. Time to beg for the fix he first met in Nueva York. *Doña Josefaaa Josefaaa!* His howl crawls through the house walls like something scurrying and afraid. My aunt places the same silver coin in his hand. My silence is a question asking if he'll ever stop chasing. She gives me the same silver answer: *Buenoooooooo, Si dios quiera.* I imagine God laying its hand on El Loco's matted hair, the touch straightening his teeth and tongue, so he can be understood among the living, and I can ask him what he went searching for in the big city—ask if it ever promised something like Ensanche Luperon.

### III.

Evening. I smack dominos down with my best friend Julian, who says: Listen. *Esas una bachata*. The sound runs high-pitched; fingers staccato over the steel string of a guitar, illuminating us more than the *luz* Julian stole from another house lights his game. And that's when everyone arrives:

La Araña, his night-black skin shining as he squints for the glasses he's never had.

Raquel and Fidelina, hand in hand, armed with fight and belly-full laughter.

Famalie's sweet, *Hola Mi'amor*, a ring of talcum protecting her neck.

Miguel Angel, *El Salsero*, asking, *Que lo que?* as he steps up to the game.

Richard, *El Pelotero*, pitching glove under his arm, knuckles cracked for combat.

Pochi's boulder-belly bounces as his *chanquetas* pound the floor.

Alfie tripping on her walk because she always hears her father's call.

Jonathan, *El Chino*, spitting talk at the girls with *tigeraje*. One eye on the game.

My brother Michel. My sister Patricia: duo dressed for the club, but *ni fu ni fa*, stuck at home because Hernan, blue eyes on the block, couldn't get his dad's ride.

And it's no game without Mauricio, his clunk-a-junk for a car, screeching to a stop, his laugh provoking a new game. That's when we really start smacking our dominos down, and voices from the radio ring as loud as loud as *Aye! Mi Madre!*

One flat piece follows another, all the size of a thumb, laid out like tiny bodies trying to spell something out. We calculate the weight in our hands, counting each pip on the face of each piece left. Slowly, we build a chain that remembers moves we've made.

When rum sits warm in our bellies, our pieces lay flat in a labyrinth of math. We tell jokes until dawn while making paper plate clothes for the street kittens we want. And one by one, say goodbye, telling each other, *No' chequeamos*, music still

reverberating in our ears. Ensanche Luperon opening its arms up as each one of us walk down its street. Home.

#### IV.

Ensanche Luperon *te amo*. More profoundly than the love I know in English. And when I return to your house, #49, and pack the portrait of my father in my suitcase, off to the USA, I will be taking you, every being on your face, every animal that limps in your hair, all the flowers from behind your ears, the curve of your lips and your big white teeth telling me to laugh, laugh without hesitation. This face marks a spot where I am from.

I leave you my game.

May it break down gates and crush walls crowned in broken glass. May it lay down guns that pop at night. May it dull knives used to pick locks and scissor through strings holding buttons in place. May it remember how the machete cuts cane, not flesh.

I trust that it will echo your name and bring the music we've sung.

# Elementary Education

South Carolina. I was six years old,  
fought my brothers, blasting

booger balls & laser beam stares.  
The only monument: A firecracker stand,

by the hotel that did not let us in.  
My souvenir: The Hornets' Nest.

I played with its fuse, wanting bees  
to shoot out & drop like grenades.

The raccoons on the roadside,  
reminded me of the tooth fairy,

Rat Perez, living in our Magnolia.  
I counted my teeth at the motel;

its smell of moth balls & mold  
the morning we left for the big building

Mama was going to teach in.  
My parents had told me:

One day you'll get a college degree,  
then a Masters, then . . .

That building's halls were long & wide  
soccer fields. There were closets

where my voice came back to me,  
portals I could enter & hide

from the alligators I saw at night.  
That building had a real round man;

his bald head all shine & slick,  
when he asked, *Your* children?

looking Papa up and down.  
*Ours.*

We drove home at night.  
No one said nothing.

A beam of light from a passing car  
hit my Mama's pale face,

the back of Papa's hand, dark against her cheek  
he caressed. I remembered a boy from school

asking me why I didn't look like my parents.  
I understood the question, right there,

in the backseat & wondered if the tooth fairy  
could change our colors in exchange for a tooth.

## Playing Rocky and Apollo

Our boxing gloves were tube socks.  
wrapped round our knuckles;  
cotton cushions we slapped and bumped  
like professionals. My sister and I marched,  
locking eyes with our corner men.

Our brothers smeared Vaseline  
across our faces, shoved mouth guards  
in our mouths. They built us up,  
saying things like, *Slip the jab. No fear.*

She kept her arms tucked against her ribs.  
Gloves up. Chin down.  
Eyes fixed to spot an opening.  
Silently, her fist cut the air.

A snapping inside my body,  
a subtle shifting of weight.  
And I rode the punch.  
Limbs and tendons: A calculation  
of force absorption.

Our bodies: one giant muscle  
contracting, then expanding,  
a war inside the ring,  
amongst the twin beds we slept in,  
matching floral comforters,  
Bob Marley and Michael Jackson posters,  
the giant red reading chair.

We punched out of that animal clinch,  
craving our one minute sanctuaries.  
Then the dance began again, and I remembered  
a cockfight we'd watched in horror.  
They never end until one rooster quits.