

# Exile

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Ciudad Trujillo,<sup>1</sup> New York City, 1960

The night we fled the country, Papi,  
you told me we were going to the beach,  
hurried me to get dressed along with the others,  
while posted at a window, you looked out

5 at a curfew-darkened Ciudad Trujillo,  
speaking in worried whispers to your brothers,  
which car to take, who'd be willing to drive it,  
what explanation to give should we be discovered . . .

*On the way to the beach*, you added, eyeing me.

10 The uncles fell in, chuckling phony chuckles,  
*What a good time she'll have learning to swim!*  
Back in my sisters' room Mami was packing

a hurried bag, allowing one toy apiece,  
her red eyes belying her explanation:

15 *a week at the beach so Papi can get some rest.*  
She dressed us in our best dresses, party shoes. **A**

Something was off, I knew, but I was young  
and didn't think adult things could go wrong.

So as we quietly filed out of the house  
20 we wouldn't see again for another decade,

I let myself lie back in the deep waters,  
my arms out like Jesus' on His cross,  
and instead of sinking down as I'd always done,  
magically, that night, I could stay up, **B**

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1. Ciudad Trujillo: the name of the capital of the Dominican Republic from 1936–1961, which the dictator Trujillo renamed after himself.



*Utopie* (1999), Bob Lescaux. Oil on canvas, 81 cm × 65 cm. Private Collection. Photo © The Bridgeman Art Library.

25 floating out, past the driveway, past the gates,  
in the black Ford, Papi grim at the wheel,  
winding through back roads, stroke by difficult stroke,  
out on the highway, heading toward the coast.

Past the checkpoint, we raced towards the airport,  
30 my sisters crying when we turned before  
the family beach house, Mami consoling,  
there was a better surprise in store for us!

She couldn't tell, though, until . . . until we were there.  
But I had already swum ahead and guessed  
35 some loss much larger than I understood,  
more danger than the deep end of the pool. ©

At the dark, deserted airport we waited.  
All night in a fitful sleep, I swam.  
At dawn the plane arrived, and as we boarded,  
40 Papi, you turned, your eyes scanned the horizon

as if you were trying to sight a distant swimmer,  
your hand frantically waving her back in,  
for you knew as we stepped inside the cabin  
that a part of both of us had been set adrift. **D**

45 Weeks later, wandering our new city, hand in hand,  
you tried to explain the wonders: escalators  
as moving belts; elevators: pulleys and ropes;  
blond hair and blue eyes: a genetic code.

We stopped before a summery display window  
50 at Macy's, *The World's Largest Department Store*,  
to admire a family outfitted for the beach:  
the handsome father, slim and sure of himself,

so unlike you, Papi, with your thick mustache,  
your three-piece suit, your fedora hat, your accent.  
55 And by his side a girl who looked like Heidi  
in my storybook waded in colored plastic. **E**

We stood awhile, marveling at America,  
both of us trying hard to feel luckier  
than we felt, both of us pointing out  
60 the beach pails, the shovels, the sandcastles

no wave would ever topple, the red and blue boats.  
And when we backed away, we saw our reflections  
superimposed, big-eyed, dressed too formally  
with all due respect as visitors to this country.

65 Or like, Papi, two swimmers looking down  
at the quiet surface of our island waters,  
seeing their faces right before plunging in,  
eager, afraid, not yet sure of the outcome. **F**