
YALITZA FERRERAS

After the Flood

THE ARRANGEMENT ON THE BED: Tonito—Altagracia—baby—pillow—wall, and on the morning of Day Thirty-Nine, a day before she would be cast out, she turned her head to a piece of green glass from a bottle; a pretty, shattered fractal next to Tonito's pillow, its dull gleam inches from her face. She whispered, "Tonito, no, no, no. Please, no." He whispered back, "It's OK, tía. Look, it's OK. Baby don't walk or nothing." He explained that he was collecting objects the baby could play with one day. One could build barriers to keep the bad guys out or invent terrible new creatures from parts. A few days earlier, she'd come across a tiny figure laid out on the floor. A black fly lolled out of the stickman's torso. She swept the whole thing out the front door as the fly quivered away.

Altagracia often found Tonito's chicken feathers, marbles, rocks, shells, and leaves gathered next to a chair leg, the edge of a doorframe, or tucked in a corner; but not the insect parts: beetle husks, dead bees and flies—the most valuable objects were hoarded under the bed. His piles were still lifes she might've composed for a drawing.

She lifted herself onto her elbows and flattened out her right hand, shoulders shrugged up to her ears. Tonito picked up the glass more carefully than she thought he would and placed it on her palm. With the baby's head resting in the crook of her left armpit, she dropped the glass in the space between the bed and the mosquito net next to the wall. A large cockroach scurried up and she covered her mouth so as not to scream and wake the baby, who had already started moving his little fists in front of his face. When the cockroach produced wings, and took flight, Altagracia closed her eyes. Best not to know where it landed. "And we have to keep the netting closed. Those are the rules." She reached out over Tonito, grabbed the mosquito net and asked him, "Do you want us to die?"

"Wha—?"

She squeezed the gap shut. "Nothing."

A mosquito perched on the other side of the net. Altagracia wondered if mosquitoes have feet or if their legs end in razor points as sharp as their proboscis. She

pictured many undulating legs poking through the mesh like cilia moving slowly, trapping her inside a breathing organ. She often took the grotesque to extremes until she made herself terrified or sick or inspired to pick up a pencil.

There hadn't been much warning about Tonito when her mother's half sister dropped him off a month before the baby was born, and then it was as if, at sixteen years old, Altagracia had given birth to a five-year-old along with the baby. Tonito would let out shrieks—Maaa! Maaa!—calling his mother, who was away working in the Zona Franca as a seamstress, sewing zippers into jeans for Americans even though the neighbors said that American women don't have the asses to fill them. Altagracia didn't know when he'd last seen his father. Her aunt hadn't mentioned him, but Tonito would say, "My Papa is working to buy me toys," and Altagracia would remind him that his mother was working, too, but he'd say, "Mama should be home with me." Tonito often got up to use the outhouse even though he had his own bedpan, yellow with a ring of smiling, dancing green turtles. She was supposed to be grateful that he didn't wet the bed. Once, her mother had found him curled up on the outhouse floor, and she'd had to wash the filth off his body as well as her own when she carried him out.

Altagracia was trapped in her own Altagracia-shaped hollow, her body imprinted into the makeshift mattress, an indentation in the fabric remnants that prevented her from rolling over onto the baby. Sometimes, she crawled in her trench over to the foot of the bed where her drawings and supplies were tucked in a wooden box. Her brother Segundo had made it out of discarded pallets from the port, the same pallets that made up their bed platforms. At first, she set out to document every baby gesture, mostly the gaping hole of a cry or the still mask of sleep. But he drained the life out of her—she was already back to elbows and clavicle, even though she hadn't had a parasite since before she was pregnant. Now she just had the baby feeding off her. They'd never had much to eat, yet she'd created something so luscious. She drew him out of circles and circles, something she'd learned from a book: fat cheeks, chubby knees, and plump butt loaves. The women who hovered around her were always taking away her pencils, warning that she would poke the baby's eyes out. One woman put her thumb, index, and middle fingers together and moved them from the baby to Altagracia back and forth in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. She said, "You have to be careful. You're a mother now," but there was nothing in the benediction about mothers. Altagracia made light sketches of the baby sleeping on her breast, or with his lips puckered around her nipple, and when she concentrated on drawing sometimes she could keep her

mind from the pain, and wished she'd drawn her nipples before they cracked like ripe, waterlogged tomatoes after floods. Her mother said she didn't have to draw every single thing and covered what Altagracia had begun calling her "nipple series" when any men were around, even her uncles, or Segundo. She even shielded Altagracia's father, who only visited after she became visibly pregnant to yell at her mother for letting it happen. He'd always been proud of Altagracia's drawing abilities, tacking portraits of himself and the chickens in the colmado for everyone to see, but now he just visited to see his grandson. Altagracia didn't want to get in trouble for talking back, but she, too, wanted to yell at her mother: *No need to cover me up. I've been seen.*

Even with an antenna made of a wire clothes hanger twisted into a boomerang, their latest TV was broken, so she'd listen to the signs of life starting up and shutting down from the neighbors, jolts of laughter and music when the electricity came back on, and news of politicians bringing concerned expressions and fingertip handshakes to devastated areas. The TV awaited Segundo's nascent technological prowess. Segundo collected anything that looked vaguely mechanical or electrical in case he could use the thing to fix another thing. Cement blocks held down a tarp he had sewn out of rice sacks to cover his stash of metal casings, screws, and sharp rusty pieces. He took out the objects, looked at them, fit them together, turned them around, polished objects with oily rags he kept in a bag next to the crates. After an accident in front of their shack, she had seen him collect a small motorcycle headlight with wires sticking out of the back of it like a yanked eyeball.

When Tonito first arrived, Segundo had offered up a few token odds and ends, things already rusted, in order to intercept a visit from small hands, but Tonito seemed to be more enchanted with the natural world. Talk had already started that he would become a curandero. And in the end, it wasn't the small hands of a five-year-old Segundo had to worry about, but the large swath of water that washed much of Segundo's stash away and the rust that claimed what was left. He had started spending less time in their shack when he didn't have that pile anchoring him to home anymore.

"Do you like to get bitten? It itches, don't it?" Altagracia appealed to Tonito's sense of practicality, the part of him that neatly gathered and arranged. She practiced reasoning with a small boy, something she would need to learn how to do. She kissed the back of one of the baby's plump hands and said, "Look at his tiny fingers. He can't scratch yet!"

"But! But! But I play with bugs! It's OK."

“There are nice bugs and then there are bad bugs. Like bad guys.”

“Big cockroach? Cockroach hurt you?”

“Well, no. Those are just ugly. And ugly and big with wings is bad.”

He held up his hand, touched his index finger to his thumb and asked, “Small ant?”

“No. Look, some bugs can hurt you with bites. You’ll get sick and then you can’t teach the baby how to play with the nice bugs.”

“The baby is very very very boring.”

The baby *was* boring and she already felt her life passing her by. Her art would not be hung in museums and fine homes, not that she had a clear conception of those things beyond what she’d seen on TV. She’d never left her small town, bordered on the north by foggy apparitions of peaks in the Cordillera Central, flamingos and iguanas sunning themselves by the lakes to the east and west, and the Bahía de Neiba, a turquoise jewel tucked into the country to the south, with one road in and out through their valley. Fertile farmlands surrounded them but where she lived was a brown, dirty footprint in the topography. She was from nowhere and wouldn’t become a famous anything.

When Altagracia’s mother had left to go to work a few days earlier, she had told her that there were still standing puddles the size of Lago Enriquillo to keep her inside until she could fulfill her forty days, but they always made their way inside as they pranced out of the puddles and onto the first warm skin they could find. She’d told Altagracia that being a good mother started from the very beginning and the forty days was part of it, and although Altagracia thought it was superstition, she did it anyway. She pictured her aunt trying to make her way back to Tonito, crowded into the bed of an open-topped Daihatsu truck filled with sugarcane stalks bent at odd angles like broken limbs. She’d be tucked in between the men who get brought in to clear the fields and salvage the crops; past the men sipping their cafecitos outside the colmado as they complained about Haitianos taking their jobs. Altagracia’s father would be in Las Salinas wading through mucky puddles trying to dry out all the salt, but she only knew that from floods and hurricanes past.

Tonito slid out of bed under the netting and screamed “Ow! ow! ow!” when he stepped on the jacks he had left on the floor. He hopped on one foot and held on to the other as tears welled up in his eyes. Altagracia said, “That’s what you get.”

He stopped crying and tried to grab a jack before the ball bounced back onto the floor. He didn’t look up to Altagracia when he said, “I go home with Mama.”

He went from grabbing two to three, four, five jacks. The ball bounced away from him every time.

Altagracia looked up toward the crucifix that hung over the front door because it was moving. She slid her head forward an inch. The giant roach navigated over Jesus's head and made its way down. It settled on the torso right below his shoulders as if Jesus were wearing a wing shirt. The alignment was precise. The symmetry was dazzling. She squeezed her eyes closed.

She would leave the shack to some kind of freedom and eventually swap places with her mother, who had made her way through waist-deep water to get to her job at the fruit canning factory, where they were kind enough to provide some of the workers with waders. That was the sign of real progress around here—who simmered in their own sweat, especially “around the crotch,” her mother said. Clean up or “el clino,” as the workers called it, meant efficiency and making a way that was supposed to be better for all of them, for the whole city, maybe even the whole country; and it meant you had a real job, not daydreams of unreachable things. She came home smelling like millions of flattened tomatoes—not tomato paste, but the smell of many tomatoes crushed at once, the scent a pregnant Altagracia couldn't stop smelling no matter how many times her mother ran the bar of Jabón de Cuaba up her arms when she scrubbed the dishes and pots and pans and the clothes and the floor.

When Altagracia's mother wasn't around, a new thing everyone was still getting used to, women leaving their houses to work in factories or even abroad in other countries, the neighborhood women filled in like when picking a bean out of a bowl and other beans shift into the space left behind. The women brought food, whatever they could grow in their little conucos, which suffered the same fate as the big farms, some of those made up by little plots that had been taken over and combined by foreigners or the government. It was all the ladies talked about, that and who was sleeping with whom, and ailments, many brought on by chemicals at the farms, the chemicals which were also a form of progress.

She'd heard the women talking about past pregnancies and fearing their baby would be missing a body part, or that they would slip out of their bodies, never making a sound, like a neighbor who said she stopped feeling the baby kick when she was just about due. She'd known something was wrong, but hoped it meant she was bearing an obedient child, not too fussy. The women had lowered their voices. The baby had been born silent among the mother's screams. Altagracia had been

afraid to look at her baby right after he was born, but he was whole and real. She had made a person, and there would be no going back.

Eloida from a few houses down brought over some mangú that was supposed to last all day in two little foil-covered margarine tubs, one container sagging into the foil of the other underneath because the lids were missing. Eloida put the food in the dark refrigerator. You never knew when the electricity would come back and then you'd have food that would last a little longer. Altagracia remembered how she and the other kids in the neighborhood used to fling the lids at each other like Frisbees.

"How's your milk?"

"It's coming in. All he does is eat."

"I see that! You're wasting away! But the baby is a little bit fat and that is good." Altagracia looked down at the dimple that would someday become an elbow. She supposed he had gained some weight, but she felt like she had already failed him somehow. His mouth was always open and his fists were always moving. She wondered if she was doing enough.

"Where's your brother? We have to get you more food."

"Haven't seen him in days. He's staying with the primos, with Mami near the canning factory. The boys are clearing the roads."

Eloida said, "Good, good. We need all the hands out there," and shook her head. "That's what we get for throwing out the Haitianos." Altagracia's best friend, Idalia, had stopped coming around, making sure she wasn't rounded up and sent away like her parents. Idalia had never been to Haiti, but that didn't matter.

"I'll send my girl over to help you wash diapers. I haven't been able to move much with this humidity." She shook her head. "And more rain is coming." Eloida's housedress clung underneath her breasts after she wiped the sweat. Everyone said the flooding was worse this year. Fields had been overworked and then abandoned, left barren. "This is going to be a tough season. But, at least you're young. You don't know about some parts of your body until they start weighing you down." She grabbed Altagracia's knee over the netting and shook it. "As long as the parts keep working right?" Altagracia looked up to make sure the netting was still attached. And she knew that despite what Eloida said, her body would never be the same. Although it was getting better, something had hurt from the moment she became pregnant.

Tonito was sitting on the floor near the front door lining up small rocks between his two plastic green soldiers. He made shooting sounds whenever one soldier

breached the barrier and poked the other with the nub of what was once a long, pointy rifle that had bent off. Eloida turned to him. "Look at this big man over here! Are you taking care of them?" She pointed at Altagracia and the baby with her chin. Tonito slunk down farther onto the floor. To try and spare him from Eloida's interrogations, Altagracia asked about one of the neighbors. "Rosa hasn't been by in a while."

Eloida's chest heaved. "No. She's not too mobile these days. The dengue."

Altagracia asked, "Will she be all right?" and Eloida sighed and said, "We'll see," but Altagracia knew that the dengue hit the babies and the elderly the hardest, and Rosa was too old, so she would probably not be all right. Altagracia looked down at the baby, whose skin adhered to the crevice of her arm like she had grown a new body part, and thought that in many ways she had. She hadn't been alone since he was born.

"Do you have enough coils?" Eloida pointed to the corners of the shack and didn't wait for an answer. "Here, let me light a few more." Altagracia peered at the heaps of ash left behind and the small piles of rocks and feathers near them. Eloida went out back and came in snapping the coils apart. Tonito sprang up. "I want to light it! Let me light it."

"No." She held out her hand to him and said, "Here, hold the other coil."

He stomped his feet. "Aww. I make fire."

"Stop it. Sit over there. Be good. How are you going to grow up to be a good man if you're a bad boy?"

"I'm five." He held out his palm with his fingers splayed out. Eloida threw up her hands. "OK, OK. You can help me blow it out."

Tonito stood on his tippy-toes. He rested his hand on hers as she lighted the coil and waited for it to catch. She held the lit match out for him, then yelled, "Blow!" He watched it burn. He waited patiently then inhaled deeply and blew so hard he lost his balance and teetered back on his heels. He placed his hand on his chest to steady himself. The pains of his efforts gathered on his face, first exhausted, then satiated. Eloida walked over to a corner with the coil in her hand, a thin green snake with a smoldering tail. She bent down and brushed away a space in the heap of ash next to one of Tonito's offerings. Altagracia waited for Tonito's shriek but Eloida didn't notice the rocks and feathers or pretended not to. She placed the new coil within the residue of ash and Tonito crouched down beside it. He lost interest when the red glowing tip turned into a gray line with smoke curling above it. Eloida parted the netting, draped herself over Altagracia, and squeezed the baby's

cheeks with one hand then did the same to Altagracia's. She said, "The roads are impassable," before she walked out of the shack.

Tonito looked up. Altagracia spoke quickly before he could start asking questions. "We have to fortify your fortress. It will take time, but I'll help you."

"Is Mama coming today?"

"Not today. But soon."

"When is soon?"

"Soon is a few days . . . we'll see. There are lots of big trees on the roads."

"Big trees? How do you see?"

"I know that when the wind blows, the trees fall. But they grow. They come back."

"Not like my papa right?"

"Not like your papa."

As Tonito played with his soldiers, Altagracia drew him wearing a crown woven from corn husks with chicken feathers sticking out of it. Tonito's lips were pursed together, brow furrowed, a defiant look on his face. He held a stick like the ones he used to dig holes in the back. She should've made him look happy the way children were meant to be. She added his turtle bedpan next to him on the floor. She missed her mother too.

A thin vein of pee trickled down the baby's leg and pooled in the back of his knee. She picked him up, parted the netting, and after she stepped off the bed, made sure she scrunched the opening back together. She took him out back to clean him from small buckets filled with rainwater. The sky was the blues and greens of a dark bruise. She looked down at the baby, a miniature of his father, whom she'd only been with one stolen night in an unfinished house he'd been hired to protect from thieves. Now she had a version of him forever and that was all she had.

When it began raining, she listened to the raindrops hitting like pebbles on the corrugated tin roof. The neighbors moaned collective cries of sorrow. The sky answered back with howls. She looked out through the netting at rags tucked into holes in the walls that needed patching; the pinks turning crimson, the navy blue darkening to black, a flowery pattern whose yellow petals browned and sunk into the green made by their leaves and stems. Flower bats made smooth landings in the dark corners as they came in for their insect meals, and the beetles and moths ate themselves in and out of crevices where the grooves of the roof met the walls—everything skittering, hiding.

Tonito sat on the floor next to the bed. The silhouette of his head flickered in the lamplight. He caressed feathers around a rock. He whispered to his fuzzy mound,

in the muted light, a small downy baby. He cradled it in his palms. Altagracia felt an urge to kiss his soft, dirty hands.

The next morning, she woke up on her own before the motorcycle horns and the men yelling “Batata! Yautia! Platano!” hit the streets. The baby was sleeping, having been fed several times throughout the night. The anoles he would play with one day were skittering across the walls. Thin points of light came in through seams. She turned her head and glanced at Tonito. His lips were open and moist. His chest was rising and falling with every breath.

She secured the baby in her trench, made sure Tonito hadn’t left anything sharp in the bed, then suspended herself over him without waking him up. She opened the net then went out back and took a deep breath of crisp morning air before walking into the outhouse. The sky was blue and clear. The women would be stepping into the shack with food, clean diapers, and ointments. And they would mention that it was Day Forty. She would be some kind of free. Before the baby, she didn’t have time for the women who sat around talking and gossiping and didn’t share her big dreams and aspirations. And now everything was baby, baby, baby—and Tonito. She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do about Tonito.

She went back inside and crawled into bed. She scooted down to her box of supplies and pulled out a piece of paper and a yellow school pencil. The baby shifted his head so she knew she didn’t have much time. She felt a breeze caressing her face and arms. She looked up to the slashes of wires coming in from the light pole through a curl of the tin roof. The haphazard tangles and loops on the outside of the shack were stretched taut inside. She remembered how proud she’d been of Segundo’s prowess and agility, how he slithered along the pole. Her eyes followed the edge of the door frame down to a wad of palm fiber dancing on the floor. The breeze was coming in through a clear triangle of an opening in the netting. She looked down at Tonito as she reached over him to pinch the netting closed and saw the mosquito’s long, graceful legs balanced on Tonito’s cheek. His lashes fluttered. Altagracia stopped breathing. She reached out and pressed her thumb and index finger over the mosquito, taking care to crush its entire body. Then she cursed the mosquito back to the larva it came from.

She drew circles and circles trying to reach an image that looked like the baby, but she was holding the pencil with her fist, and the lines were ruptures like scratches, not anything of the softness of her child. There had been one thing she’d been trying to capture. He would let out these small gasps. Was he running out of air

or forcing in more? She had to know. She kept striking the paper until something like a face erupted on the page. She hadn't meant to, but she thought she'd drawn El Cuco, the taker of babies and children, although none of his victims had lived to describe him. It was said he lived in the walls and he would come out when you were bad. She thought of a knot in a wooden plank in their shack, extruded to a hideous burl that could smother your breath, or produce jagged teeth to gulp you until there was nothing left to find. She drew round eyes, mostly pupil with a thin sliver of white iris to enhance the contrast from the rest of his fibrous head. And, finally, a dark, gaping hole of a mouth.

She cradled her baby to her breast and coaxed her nipple toward his lips before he could let out a cry. After the baby was done feeding, she put him in her hollow and moved over closer to Tonito, who brushed his hand along the red mound forming on his cheek in his sleep. She saw another mosquito hovering above their feet, and when she reached out to crush it, her hand extended past the net—stretching out into the room with a fistful of air.