

I step into the salt-soaked humidity
and they wrap the girl behind me in a flag.
I duck out of the photo, watching.

Half the traffic lights in Toa Baja have no power, or maybe
someone just turned them off.
I can read almost all the signs now.

Sometimes the churches along the highway look like Disneyland
facades, like if I just pushed them they'd fall over.
Every SE ALQUILA is a tightening in my throat.

The Airbnb smells like my aunt's house in Brooklyn, which is
confusing. I tiptoe through the hallway
and wake with the birds before Yase's alarm goes off.

(Yase's definition of an alarm is blasting Bad Bunny in the kitchen. I lied
when she asked me if it was okay if she made oatmeal.)
In the morning, the shadows are greener than the hills.

The trees here make me want
to pray, especially the rock-ringed violeta africana, an embraced
invader shedding soft red flowers on the grass.

Víctor laughs about metaphors.
Chayote barks in agreement. I suspect the rocks
are not an effective container.

Outside the garden, the kids are gone, but the schoolhouse murals haven't started
to fade
yet. Taínos gaze across the water with a flag (still dark blue) at their side,
hands permanently shading their faces. Replanting is slow work.

We decide the orange glow on the mountaintop is a building,
but later we see the swathes of blackened stumps in Ponce
and no one answers my questions.

The gandules aren't ripe. I expect to taste kindergarten anyway,
the sugar snap peas we planted out back, but I get laughed at.
I guess pigeon peas aren't really peas.

Whatever. I say I think Denice Frohman is half Puerto Rican
and Yase laughs and says, "so then, Puerto Rican"
and the wind settles on my shoulders. I don't burn

my feet on the sidewalk. We spend our whole post-lunch hour arguing, but when the heat lessens, Stephanie and Austin and I trade off pickaxing until our hands vibrate in sympathy.

I remember standing back from steep drops, chicken feed spilling from my small hands. It's three days before I let myself breathe into a hug.

I go looking for collapse and yeah, cracked concrete foundations scattered in the fields hint at vanished wood, but mostly there are Titi Rosin's steady hands on mine, and I keep finding more lerenes buried in the soil.

Not that Puerto Rico se levanta government bullshit. This is just me and my family and mi gente saying I'm gonna keep coming back.

We loop bachata in a kitchen with no walls and I teach the boys to spin. (We limit ourselves to one Bad Bunny interlude.) We kick our boots off,

grow roots, compost the ashes.
I toss another coquí outside, but
we leave the windows open.