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## Donatila's Victory Orchard

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# Donatila's Victory Orchard

by Virgil Suarez

My grandmother keeps order in her garden,  
even when the guinea fowl get loose & run  
amuck, pecking at the worms in the furrows,  
plucking insects from her tomato plants.

This is 1968, nine years after the Revolution,  
and my grandmother, Donatila, refuses  
to believe this is the way it'll be, such constant  
lack of vegetables, meat, the way produce

reappears in the marketplaces. "*Basta ya!*"  
She shouts at nobody, except me. I am there  
with her when she brings out the bowl  
of old rice to feed the chickens, which come

when called, a flutter of wing, a scattering  
of feathers. My grandmother stands arms  
akimbo, looks out beyond my grandfather's  
tin roofed green house, where he keeps his tack,

the one he uses to ride his horse. He's been  
gone three days now, out working sugar  
cane. She cooks for her children & grandchildren,  
and I am standing next to her when she leans

over, praying mantis fast, snatches a chicken  
by its neck, wrings it; a storm of ash-gray  
feathers explodes into the air, and when she  
lets go, it jumps like crazy, *muy loca*,

like *mal de sambito*, a Cuban saying for fits,  
some form of the jerks, or something,  
and I remember asking why, and she simply  
looks at me and says, "*Hay que comer, no?*"



True, we have to eat, but this chicken? Now.

She picks up the bird as though she is picking  
up a feather duster, walks inside the house,  
boils water, floats the dead bird in the roiling

pot and plucks the feathers. Gold coins, I think,  
she is pulling gold slivers from this bird,  
some ancient trick I'm now privy to, white  
skin showing through in the balding spots.

You will learn to do this, she says. You will learn  
to kill what you eat, and once you do, you cannot  
forget it. I reach over and pick a clump of wet  
feathers, they come off and stick like dead leaves

to my fingers. I am thinking dinner. I am hungry.  
My grandmother Donatila keeps the food coming.  
My grandmother Donatila gardens in Cuba.  
It is 1968. We wait for something to happen.

