Tint Journal

ESSAY

Living In-Between

by Marlena Maduro Baraf



"House of Yarrow and Sunflowers" by Rebecca Pyle

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We've taken off and curving left as we rise; the left motor is droning harshly. The highways below are close enough that I can make out the long vans and trucks and certain colors of the cars. We are over the Atlantic now. We've started our journey south to my busy city in that squiggle of land at the top of the South American hip.

My brother Carlos waits for us "just after you leave customs," past the air-conditioned, limbo world of Panama City's Tocúmen Airport. The moist heat receives me. Carlos rolls my suitcase under the carport toward the parked cars and clicks three and four times at the trunk of the car he's borrowed because it has more room. I am here with my American husband on an eight-day visit to celebrate my birthday with family.

Carlos drives us to a businessman's café for a soup and sandwich even though it's ten at night. The men attending to us look weary and spent. Within minutes Carlos' wife Martha and their two grown daughters arrive. We laugh about my husband's order of *un Sandwich Cubano* without the cheese, without the pork, without the mustard, without without... I am pleased with my *sancocho,* chicken soup in a yucca broth, not because it's good, but because it signals that I'm home. I've been feeling inexplicably lonely in New York and this chorus of family has put things right.

At almost midnight Carlos delivers us to Roberto's apartment in one of many towers in a residential neighborhood of the city where we will stay — as we always do — a black coarse blanket on our bed, the humming AC forcing an unpleasant chill on my calves, the small closet emptied. My brother Roberto, waddling in his *chancletas,* is hugging me.

The next morning, my sister, Patricia, arrives and drives us to an office of the *Tribunal Electoral* in El Dorado, a neighborhood of Panama City that has mushroomed chaotically. A Chinese girl in pink sandals is sitting on her mother's lap. The government office is not a wide place. Plastic chairs are crammed along the length. "Take a ticket from the green machine," the uniformed man instructs when I ask about renewing my *cédula de identidad,* Panama's national identity card that I try to keep current. For my photo I am guided to a cubicle in the back where a round faced girl, an indigenous Guna-Yala, waits her turn. "It's my first *cédula,*" she confides, "I'm eighteen." Panama is a melting pot and the human landscape of my childhood.

"Buenos días, madre," the young clerk calls me in. He's added 'mother' to his greeting, a sweetness I didn't expect. He's dark; he's another *panameño,* like my white self. I press my fingers onto the too-small electronic pad, four right, four left. Two thumbs now. He takes my photo with my glasses on. "Come and see," he says. I bend over his desk and crane my neck sideways to look at the computer screen. "Do you like the photo?" he says. My last official photo at the DMV in New York took place in another universe.

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At 94 and 102, my widowed elderly *tías* are family matriarchs. I call the centenarian. She's on her last hand of bridge with friends. My proudly independent aunt has flexible tubes across her face dispensing oxygen. An aide helps her. She's fallen too many times. "I can't get up and fix the flowers by myself," she says. "Or go to the window. This is what life is like now." I give her the box of pretty Jacques Torres chocolates I bought for her in New York. Bite-size pieces, tangy and dark.

First, second, and third cousins organize a lunch now that I'm in town. We are ten at the square table. Which grandchild is getting married now? I can't keep track. A daughter's job. A traffic jam on Avenida Perú. The conversation turns to ailments; mastectomies are being played down, and other cancers. My *primas* know one another's stories by heart. Do I still belong?

Eager for novelty, my husband and I take a cab to Casco Antiguo, Panama's old Spanish quarter; only a ten-minute ride today. My grandmother lived here. *Right here* on Calle A! I show him. Sidewalks are one-person wide, and we spill onto the cobblestone streets. Stone facades, pounded by time, are held by steel bars against collapse. We pass French cafés, ice cream parlors, stores with hats. I buy a new Panama the color of sand with a black ribbon across the crown. I angle it rakishly on my head.

My sister and brothers and some of our nieces and cousins have joined us in a few escapades to the countryside where the lush rainforest and the bush persist. But family itself is soil and memory. Unlike the constant movement of people across the United States that ruptures families, most people in my extended family remain close to home — a place that I have left. Their stories play and replay on a daily basis. They are engaged in community. Layers of memory can thicken.

It is time to go. I return to the other place I call home, a suburban town on the outskirts of New York City. To daffodils and forsythia. To our house with a Dutch colonial roofline. To orderly roads and, soon enough, the frigid cold of winter. To my work and my growing affection for other Hispanics in this country of my choosing, whom I seek out in my nostalgia. To our grown sons who set their fledgling roots in New York and have relocated to other states of the Union.

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It's a brilliant day in Central Park. The magnolias are in bloom. The apple trees, too. The forest of deciduous trees is showing a tinge of green, not yet chartreuse, whispering its promise. It's Saturday. The whole city has escaped its confinement. Happy folks are stretching their legs and raising their faces to the sun: women in head coverings, babies with

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bonnets, bikers, tattooed men, saxophonists, and drummers. Children are climbing the statuesque rocks.

In the late evening we take the Metro North train home.

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