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ELIZABETH ALEXANDER CREATIVE WRITING AWARD 2025 WINNER FOR PROSE

Danielle Bradley

Preserves

Dolores slow—slow in her disposition, in movement and desire. Slow and precise, she'd iron linen dry from the clothesline and set her table for two. The tostones triple-fried and pan de Mallorca fluffy after extra proofing and she'd dress herself, too, in linen ironed to a pleat. Cafecito, of course, and often preserves she'd make from the papaya tree in her neighbor's yard. The fruit she'd pluck quick, uncharacteristic, and only when peaked over the fence. A small slice of shame would overcome Dolores when she'd hide the papaya in her bra but that shame would dispel when the preserves thickened from pectin and she'd image João spooning it into her mouth.

What strange joy! This bliss with João was unexpected and rife with consumption. Always they'd eat and linger. Something new in every embrace Dolores thought, here and now at 53. João was most comfortable in Portuguese and Dolores in English but with some Spanish, too. Their conversations were like the papaya preserve—sweet and best mixed by following one's gut. Oh João! Away in Brasil to visit his family and how Dolores missed his slowness and precision. She had full thoughts between each of his pushes and pulls. Those brief moments of disembodiment permitted her pleasure anew. The slowness of their collective movements a boon, the precision comfortable. She wished he was nearby.

Now boarding flight 1128 to Philadelphia.

Never boarded a plane first, Dolores. She was always last and counterbalancing the weight of first class in the back with her personal little carry on shoved below the seat in front of her. The seats at the back-back-back of

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the plane often didn't recline and so Dolores thought positives. Good for my back, that upright position! Good for digestion and building character!

Now boarding group B. Group B now boarding to Philadelphia.

She had also never been to Philadelphia. If her travels were for something else or were longer, she'd go to see the Betsy Ross house. As a girl, she gave a report on Ross to her fifth-grade class. It didn't bother Dolores that the tale of Ross was an oral one, passed on and made important by Ross's family. Why doubt her truth because history did? Dolores never doubted Mariana Bracetti. In fact, Dolores thought of her often that winter when she embroidered napkins blue and red for João's oldest daughter, Rebecka. Her handiwork so delicate, she was proud of the flowers she spun and thought, for a moment, to keep the set for herself. She was glad she didn't. She hoped Rebecka would call her soon with thanks. Dolores could embroider another set after she returned from Philadelphia, this time yellow and orange. A treat for herself to be earned.

Now boarding group F. Final boarding. Group F now boarding.

Dolores liked the slight incline of ramp to plane. If she'd been walking down it alone, she would've closed her eyes and trusted her knees. Row 31, seat F. The last on the plane but mercifully not the middle. Already a small treat.

She waited, kind and patient, while others hoisted their bags and sat. In her row, a girl. Twelve, maybe thirteen? Dolores admitted to herself a flaw: she knew so few children that they could be any age and Dolores would think, "Well, she's twelve."

"Hi," the girl said, removing an earbud, giving a wave.

Dolores smiled tepid.

"I think the middle seat is empty," the girl said. "Lucky us."

Another smile and mostly for the prospect of the empty seat.

"I'm Jada."

"I'm Dolores."

Jada nodded polite and final, as if she were instructed to introduce herself and could now check it off some list. She looked quite short, though Dolores could not tell for certain. Her cheeks were round and shiny, something discreetly childlike, but on Jada they didn't seem like a child's. Their roundness made it look like she was smiling. A dangerous characteristic for a girl, Dolores thought. Dangerous for people to always think you're smiling.

"How're you doing, honey?" The flight attendant asked Jada.

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"I'm good!"

"We're preparing for takeoff, now. So could you fasten your seatbelt for me?"

Jada fastened dutifully, pulling the belt taut. Dolores adjusted her own to match. Flying wasn't bothersome to Dolores, but she didn't much appreciate the feeling of take-off, that tight airiness in her lungs that dropped to her stomach. The nausea was particularly bad on the flight and so Dolores comforted herself with João.

He'd be back in a few weeks and hopefully with something for her. From his last visit home, he brought to Dolores a little gold-plated necklace, something discreet and easy to travel with. But oh how Dolores loved it! Delicate and thin, it made her feel like Rita Moreno. It was tucked away safe in her carry on but she wished she had it on now. Something for her to hold, a tangible reminder that João was probably thinking of her too.

Dolores threw up slow. The substance mostly liquid but with some chunks, probably the sausage she cooked herself for breakfast. She sealed the paper bag correctly, folding the flaps to the center and tight. Jada offered Dolores her bag and the one from the middle seat. She refused them with a wave and took from her carry on a small bottle of mouth wash and then swished in the bathroom. Pleased to have gotten this one over with, she swished once more and wiped clean her face with a wet paper towel. A benefit of these back-back-back seats was their proximity to the bathroom. Another good thing about this trip! Another good positive!

"Are you okay?" Jada asked as Dolores sat.

"I just get nausea on flights."

"I do too sometimes."

Dolores nodded at the information but was skeptical of its truthfulness. Jada seemed just fine during take-off, even a bit joyful as she relaxed into the feeling of weightlessness, her eyes closed. It looked almost an act of religion, but revelation was a bit too mature a feeling to ascribe to a girl, Dolores thought.

"Everything alright back here?" the flight attendant asked.

"Yup," Jada said.

"You really are a pro now," she said, handing Jada a water bottle with a wink before walking off.

Jada offered the water to Dolores who took it and sucked quickly, draining the bottle of water and air, the plastic collapsing in on itself.

Dolores was a bit surprised at her own desperate act, how boorish and ill-mannered. But what decency did one need to show in front of a child? Jada knew little of life and even littler of Dolores.

"I could ask for another one," Jada said. "I'm sort of friends with her now."

"Thank you but I'm used to it. What I need is some food."

"They'll start the service in a minute," Jada said and then after a pause, "I only know because I fly a lot. Like, twice a month. Maybe even more sometimes. My mom lives in Philly now."

"That's nice," Dolores said, distracted.

"Why're you going to Philly?"

"I have an appointment."

"For what?"

Not answering Jada, Dolores removed from her bag a spread and celebration. Another small comfort for this trip. She set first the napkin on the seat's tray table. The napkin an amber-colored one with an embroidered scallop design around its edges that Dolores admired. The pan de Mallorca was no longer warm but still soft enough to be properly enjoyed. Cheese this time, too, cubes of sharp cheddar that Dolores one by one stuck toothpicks into for ease of consumption. The jar of papaya preserves the grand finale. Exactly 3.4 ounces and chunky.

Dolores felt proud of her foresight. She knew that she'd need comfort on this flight and so properly prepared. She sat straighter in her seat that didn't recline, hoisted up by her own self-regard.

"Wow," Jada said.

Jada's astonishment seemed genuine, which Dolores liked. She was pleased to be on brief display, her bounty indicative of something good about her. Dolores was exactly who she wanted to be on this flight, exactly who she would be after her appointment: someone who took care of herself. The life she deserved was only a day or two away. Why not let it begin sooner? Dolores thought. Why not permit herself the joy she's due?

Jada's staring continued until Dolores gave in.

"You're hungry?" Dolores asked.

"I'm sorry," Jada said, looking away.

"Why don't you take some?" Dolores said. "I probably brought too much anyway."

Jada started with cheese but didn't pop the whole thing into her mouth. Dolores was amused by the three bites Jada managed to get from the cube.

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She took a piece of pan de Mallorca and unrolled from its tail. It looked like a golden-brown worm strewn across Jada's tray table.

"Would you like some?" Dolores asked, gesturing to the jar. "It's papaya."

Jada spooned the littlest amount on to her worm.

"Take more if you'd like."

"You don't have much."

"I have plenty more at home."

"You made it yourself?"

"I did. There's a big papaya tree right by our apartment."

"You're married?" Jada asked.

"Yes," Dolores said after short consideration.

"My parents are divorced."

"Oh."

"Do you have kids?"

"Um, three daughters."

"I'm an only child now."

"Why don't you take some more," Dolores said.

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Jada continued to delight in the food and Dolores was glad she eventually shared with the girl. It could be nice to have a little company, a little travel companion. Dolores pictured the other passengers walking to the back-back-back of the plane only to stumble upon their picturesque gathering. What class, the other passengers would think. Dolores suspected that a passing woman coveted her embroidered napkin and so while the women was in the bathroom Dolores removed another from her bag and laid it on display. She thought they looked posh, her and Jada. Maybe even like mother and daughter, on their way to a girl's trip or back home from a girl's trip. They even matched, both of them in shades of green. Jada's long braids pulled back. Dolores's curls in a clip. Who needs the Betsy Ross house? Dolores thought. Not us!

"What're your daughter's names?" Jada asked.

"Rebecka, Julia, and Carol."

"Those are nice names. My sister's name was Lucy."

"That's a nice name, too."

"How old are they?"

"Well let's see," Dolores said, spreading jam across her own worm of bread. "They're all older than you."

Jada took another cube of cheese and pulled the toothpick out carefully. After each nibble, she again sat it on the tray table, as if she was considering

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whether she was full, whether another bite was warranted. Dolores admired Jada's repose. She seemed a very structured girl, someone with careful foresight. It seemed composure flowed so simply from her—that sort of stateliness comes only innately. Dolores felt she was in good company with Jada.

"My sister really loved cheese like this," Jada said.

"Yellow?"

"No, in these cubes. We'd count how many she could fit in her mouth when we were little."

"Well how many?"

"Fifteen one time!" Jada said.

Her laugh while she said it was unrestrained, something honest and straight from her belly. There was no stricture there, Dolores thought. That joy for Jada could be felt in unconstrained spurts, in all decibels. Dolores wondered how all these things might exist at once in the girl. How she might've come to know how to be.

"That sounds very funny."

"She was so funny," Jada said, the last sliver of cheese in her mouth. "She was the funniest person alive."

Dolores's cramps were sudden and smacked her right as she bit into her bread. She adjusted herself, hopeful it was a bit of gas, that relief might follow. It didn't and so Dolores adjusted again. Uncomfortable, she tried to give off the feeling that she was enjoying the silence. Jada spooned the preserves onto another worm of bread. The look of it all was a bit putrid to Dolores now.

"Excuse me a moment," Dolores said.

The blood bright in her panties. "Hmm" and "strange," Dolores thought. She wiped herself and the blood was bright there, too. She wiped again and a third time and still it was bright and wet and fresh. She rolled toilet paper around her hand. It looked like gauze on a burn, almost as if Dolores was careless with the oven. She took the rolled lump and placed it atop her panties, a makeshift pad and the best she had. Even more pleased with the short distance between the bathroom and her seat, Dolores waddled back to Jada.

She felt blood expel and slip as she bent to sit and so returned to the bathroom. Again, how fortunate to be so close! She exchanged the toilet paper in her panties for a fresher, bigger wad and then placed yet another wad atop. Two layers of protection should hold, Dolores thought. All good! All fine!

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When she returned to her seat there was a wrapped, pink and flat package on it.

"I get my period too," Jada said. "My dad always sends me to Philly with lots of pads, just in case Mom forgets."

Back in the bathroom, the sound of the pad unwrapping was familiar but distant. Dolores was grateful for its thickness. She was also grateful there was no mirror—she looked mousey when she cried. Something meager and embarrassing about the way her dark eyelashes clumped when wet, almost as if she misapplied mascara. She wiped her face with a fresh paper towel and thought to herself: sana sana. sana sana. sana sana.

"Thank you for that," Dolores said to Jada, sitting down.

"Thanks for the food. This is the best flight to Philly ever."

Dolores nodded, pleased by their little exchange. Happy for Jada's company.

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The landing smoother than take off. Dolores and Jada waited for the rest of the passengers to collect their rollaboards from the overhead bins and deplane. By the time they were able to stand, the plane was hot. Dolores had stripped off her layers and was wearing just a t-shirt. She thought perhaps she looked indecent to Jada, with her bra visible under the thin white cotton. Was this an undoing? Dolores thought. The shirt had lost its crispness during the flight and surely her eyes were puffed and perhaps red. She was pleased, again, to be at the back of the plane because it meant she'd go unseen. Her fall from provider to clammy was speedy. It reminded Dolores of the condition of her life.

"Excuse me, could you hang back a moment?" The flight attendant asked Dolores. "I just wanted to thank you for your kindness towards Jada. She's such a good kid. It's really unfair what's happening to her."

"Oh, sure," Dolores said, quickly. And then, after a moment, "I had a nice time, too."

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The airport bathroom was larger, to Dolores's relief and pleasure. She could properly sit with her knees wide. She was bleeding still—less flow, more sprinkle. She disposed of the soiled pad and wrapped another wad of toilet paper. To be unseen and seated felt a luxury to her. Dolores wondered if she might just get the miscarriage over with there. She could set up a little

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home in the stall. The floor tiles looked cool; they might feel good to press one's face to. The bathroom seemed low traffic, hardly used and would offer some peace and privacy. There was a leaky faucet with water pooling underneath that sounded serene to Dolores, what she imaged a spa might feel like. Perhaps it would be better here than at home. A space she'd never again return to, a distant memory. Her real home could remain a place of goodness, one not colored red by consequence.

What a fool she'd been! Dolores a fool! Treating herself to fantasy without discernment. As if her recklessness wouldn't have consequence. She felt proud when she came up with the plan to abort—she thought she'd be a woman who made determinations for her body. She reveled in and dreamt about telling João. He would express surprise when she'd detail it to him. "Yes, all by myself!" Dolores would say. "All the way to Philadelphia alone and at the clinic appointment alone. Without a hitch!" He'd be impressed by her resourcefulness and smarts and question how he ever called her delicate and rash. He'd know then that she was sturdy, that she had her own life and future to preserve and protect—just like he had his.

Dolores was embarrassed to have instead found herself seated on a public toilet and considering moving in. She wiped and flushed, thinking that maybe João hadn't even brought to Brasil the napkins she embroidered. That Rebecka didn't know her name, that she existed at all.

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"It looks like you've just arrived," the woman at the desk said.

"There's been a change. I need to get back to Fort Lauderdale," Dolores said.

"The flight you booked is economy class. So, I'm sorry, but we can't change it. We can book another flight for you."

"I'd really like to get home. I need some help."

"I understand but I'm sorry, there isn't anything I can do."

"I think I'm going to miscarry soon," Dolores said. "I started spotting on the flight here and I think, well, based on what I know, I think I've got about a day."

"Is your husband with you?"

"I'm not married."

"Oh," she said, soft. "I'm—I'm sorry. Just, just give me a second."

Where should one look during a time like this? Dolores settled on the woman's hands, capable and typing away. Those hands moved with just one

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goal: to help Dolores. She wanted to kiss them, to have them presented to her and to kiss each one with gratitude.

"The flight you were just on runs that route all day," she said. "It leaves again in an hour. Is that okay?"

"Thank you," Dolores said. She didn't have to try and convey any feeling when she said it. It was simple that Dolores only had thanks to give. She walked back to the gate and a familiar sight.

"Jada? Is everything okay?" Dolores asked.

"I'm still waiting for my mom. She has to come get me at the gate."

"Will she be here soon?"

"Maybe." Jada answered. "Is everything okay?"

"I decided I didn't really need that appointment."

"So you'll go home to your daughters instead?"

Dolores felt a buzzing tenderness towards Jada. Was it strange to tell a child stranger that they've brought you great comfort? Jada in her green sweater was also awaiting a deferred care. Dolores hoped Jada's would come soon and complete. She wanted it more for Jada than for herself.

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"Would you like the rest of the food?" Dolores asked. "Since I'm heading back home, I'll have lots more."

"From your big papaya tree, right? I can trade you."

She removed from her bag two pads and again Dolores felt the buzz of tenderness. She agreed to the trade appreciatively, hungrily.

"Take this too," Dolores said, handing to Jada her golden necklace from João.

"Are you sure? It looks expensive."

"I am," Dolores said with a nod. "I'd rather you have it."

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Dolores was surprised to board the plane first. *Group A, Business Class* printed on her ticket. She wished again those woman's hands were offered to her to kiss. The extra four inches of leg room was luxury. Dolores felt hot with tears. She had space to cross and uncross her legs sore from steadying. How grateful she was for those four inches! For what it conveyed about her as a woman: she was provided care.

"Oh," the flight attendant said. The same one from the first flight. "Is everything okay?"

Dolores nodded a tiny "no."

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The flight attendant brought Dolores a water bottle and blanket wrapped in plastic. The others in business class were given the same, but the attendant gave them first to Dolores, which she felt meant something.

The seat next to her was filled by a man who paid her no mind. This was preferable to Dolores. It seemed unlikely that he could live up to Jada. She had no use for conversation now—everything would seem a lesser distraction.

Dolores said thank you, bless you to those four inches each time she used the bathroom at the front of the plan. It was smaller than the one at the back-back-back, but equally close. The pads Jada gave her like gold, Dolores unwrapped each one carefully upon use. Her discharge was brown, chunky even. The bathroom at the front had a mirror and Dolores inspected herself slow and precise. Her clipped curls still framed her face nicely, rounding out her cheeks. Her baby hairs looked delicate stuck to her forehead, like when she was a girl. She replaced the lost color in her lips by patting them with cool water. The whole act refreshing and useful in distracting Dolores from the slight but growing pain. She was ready to be home and secure. She was thankful to be on the way.

Dolores enjoyed her complimentary pretzels and drank a cold ginger ale with the blanket tucked in at her corners. With the free headphones the flight attendant gave her, she watched a cooking show. By the time the plane landed, Dolores felt confident she could spatchcock a chicken. She prepared a mental list of ingredients for the meal she'd cook for herself when she passed the miscarriage. Something greasy, she thought. Something big and with onions.

She thanked, again, the flight attendant as she deplaned and then she thanked the bus driver that drove her to her car at the park-and-ride.

"Where you comin' from?" the driver asked Dolores.

"Philly."

"You have a good time?"

"No," Dolores said.

The driver's laugh was instinctive and so without restraint. It reminded Dolores of Jada's. She laughed with them.

Dolores put her bag in the passenger seat and waited for the car to cool. There was great comfort in getting into a hot car. There was a great deal of familiarity. It'd be a short ride back to her apartment. Nothing too long and likely without traffic. It was daytime still, but Dolores resolved to snag a papaya from the neighbor's tree when she got back. She deserved it, she thought—to allow herself sweetness without shame.

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And then, a monkey. No, monkeys. Greened and silvered and lined up almost by size in the tree right next to her car. So precise, Dolores thought. The largest moved towards her, slow, and Dolores rolled down her car window a peak. She didn't mean it as an invitation, but the monkey placed its little hand between the little space and so Dolores opened it more. Surely, a hallucination. Dolores hallucinating. Monkeys here? The park-and-ride a silly, small place for revelation. We don't get to choose much, Dolores thought. The monkey's fingers curled around the glass and the extending branch it was on swayed. The others adjusted to accommodate the weight.

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