

Exile

JULIA ALVAREZ

Ciudad Trujillo,¹ New York City, 1960

The night we fled the country, Papi,
you told me we were going to the beach,
hurried me to get dressed along with the others,
while posted at a window, you looked out

5 at a curfew-darkened Ciudad Trujillo,
speaking in worried whispers to your brothers,
which car to take, who'd be willing to drive it,
what explanation to give should we be discovered . . .

On the way to the beach, you added, eyeing me.
10 The uncles fell in, chuckling phony chuckles,
What a good time she'll have learning to swim!
Back in my sisters' room Mami was packing

a hurried bag, allowing one toy apiece,
her red eyes belying her explanation:
15 *a week at the beach so Papi can get some rest.*
She dressed us in our best dresses, party shoes. **A**

Something was off, I knew, but I was young
and didn't think adult things could go wrong.
So as we quietly filed out of the house
20 we wouldn't see again for another decade,

I let myself lie back in the deep waters,
my arms out like Jesus' on His cross,
and instead of sinking down as I'd always done,
magically, that night, I could stay up, **B**

ANALYZE VISUALS

How do you interpret this surrealistic painting, titled *Utopie* [Utopia]? What connections can you make between it and the poem "Exile"?

A NARRATIVE POETRY

Notice the place and time of events. Who are the people mentioned and what conflicts do they face?

B READING POETRY

The speaker is not literally floating in water. What is she actually doing?

1. **Ciudad Trujillo**: the name of the capital of the Dominican Republic from 1936–1961, which the dictator Trujillo renamed after himself.



Utopie (1999), Bob Lescaux. Oil on canvas, 81 cm x 65 cm. Private Collection. Photo © The Bridgeman Art Library.

25 floating out, past the driveway, past the gates,
 in the black Ford, Papi grim at the wheel,
 winding through back roads, stroke by difficult stroke,
 out on the highway, heading toward the coast.

Past the checkpoint, we raced towards the airport,
 30 my sisters crying when we turned before
 the family beach house, Mami consoling,
 there was a better surprise in store for us!

She couldn't tell, though, until . . . until we were there.
 But I had already swum ahead and guessed
 35 some loss much larger than I understood,
 more danger than the deep end of the pool. **C**

C NARRATIVE POETRY
 What new **conflict** does
 the speaker recognize?

At the dark, deserted airport we waited.
All night in a fitful sleep, I swam.
At dawn the plane arrived, and as we boarded,
40 Papi, you turned, your eyes scanned the horizon

as if you were trying to sight a distant swimmer,
your hand frantically waving her back in,
for you knew as we stepped inside the cabin
that a part of both of us had been set adrift. **D**

45 Weeks later, wandering our new city, hand in hand,
you tried to explain the wonders: escalators
as moving belts; elevators: pulleys and ropes;
blond hair and blue eyes: a genetic code.

We stopped before a summery display window
50 at Macy's, *The World's Largest Department Store*,
to admire a family outfitted for the beach:
the handsome father, slim and sure of himself,

so unlike you, Papi, with your thick mustache,
your three-piece suit, your fedora hat, your accent.
55 And by his side a girl who looked like Heidi
in my storybook waded in colored plastic. **E**

We stood awhile, marveling at America,
both of us trying hard to feel luckier
than we felt, both of us pointing out
60 the beach pails, the shovels, the sandcastles

no wave would ever topple, the red and blue boats.
And when we backed away, we saw our reflections
superimposed, big-eyed, dressed too formally
with all due respect as visitors to this country.

65 Or like, Papi, two swimmers looking down
at the quiet surface of our island waters,
seeing their faces right before plunging in,
eager, afraid, not yet sure of the outcome. **F**

D READING POETRY

In what sense have the speaker and her father been "set adrift"?

E NARRATIVE POETRY

Notice that the **setting** has changed. What new **conflict** does it present?

F READING POETRY

What ideas does this comparison to swimmers bring to mind?

CROSSING THE BORDER

JOY HARJO

We looked the part. **G**
It was past midnight, well into
the weekend. Coming out of Detroit
into the Canada side, border guards
5 and checks. We are asked, "Who are you Indians
and which side are you from?"
Barney answers in a broken English.
He talks this way to white people
not to us. "Our kids."
10 My children are wrapped
and sleeping in the backseat.
He points with his lips to half-eyed
Richard in the front.
"That one, too."
15 But Richard looks like he belongs
to no one, just sits there wild-haired
like a Menominee would.
"And my wife. . . ." Not true.
But hidden under the windshield
20 at the edge of this country
we feel immediately suspicious.
These questions and we don't look
like we belong to either side.

"Any liquor or firearms?"
25 He should have asked that years ago
and we can't help but laugh.
Kids stir around in the backseat
but it is the border guard who is anxious.
He is looking for crimes, stray horses
30 for which he has no apparent evidence. **H**

G READING POETRY
Read the first stanza
aloud. What do you learn
about the speaker in the
poem?

H NARRATIVE POETRY
What is the conflict
between the border guard
and the Indians?

“Where are you going?”
Indians in an Indian car, trying
to find a Delaware powwow
that was barely mentioned in Milwaukee.
35 Northern singing in the northern sky.
Moon in a colder air.
Not sure of the place but knowing the name
we ask, “Moravian Town?”

The border guard thinks he might have
40 the evidence. It pleases him.
Past midnight.
Stars out clear into Canada
and he knows only to ask,
“Is it a bar?”

45 Crossing the border into Canada,
we are silent. Lights and businesses
we drive toward could be America, too,
following us into the north. 1

1 READING POETRY
What aspects of America
might follow the Indians
into the north?



Sports Utility Vehicle in Moonlight. Todd Davidson. © Todd Davidson/Getty Images.