

Selected Poems from *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson

pasteles & pernil

When Maria's brother, Carlos, gets baptized
he is just a tiny baby in a white lace gown with
so many twenty-dollar bills folded into fans pinned
all over it
that he looks like a green-and-white angel.

Maria and I stand over his crib
talking about all the candy we could buy with just one
of those fans. But we know that God is watching
and don't even dare touch the money.

In the kitchen, there is *pernil* roasting in the oven
the delicious smell filling the house and Maria says,
You should just eat a little bit. But I am not allowed
to eat pork. Instead, I wait for *pasteles* to get
passed around,
wait for the ones her mother has filled with chicken
for Jackie, mi ahijada, wait for the moment when
I can peel the paper
away from the crushed-plantain-covered meat,
break off small pieces with my hands and let the
pastele melt in my mouth. *My mother makes the best
pasteles in Brooklyn,* Maria says. And even though I've
only eaten her mom's, I agree.

Whenever there is the smell of *pernil* and *pasteles* on
the block, we know
there is a celebration going on. And tonight, the party

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is at Maria's house. The music is loud and the cake
is big and the *pasteles*
that her mother's been making for three days are

absolutely perfect.

We take our food out to her stoop just as the grown-ups
start dancing merengue, the women lifting their long dresses
to show off their fast-moving feet,
the men clapping and yelling,
Baila! Baila! until the living room floor disappears.
When I ask Maria where Diana is she says,
They're coming later. This part is just for my family.

She pulls the crisp skin
away from the *pernil*, eats the pork shoulder
with rice and beans,
our plates balanced on our laps, tall glasses of Malta
beside us.
and for a long time, neither one of us says anything.

Yeah, I say. This is only for us. The family.

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afros

When Robert comes over with his hair blown out into an afro, I beg my mother for the same hairstyle. Everyone in the neighborhood has one and all of the black people on *Soul Train*. Even Michael Jackson and his brothers are all allowed to wear their hair this way. Even though she says no to me, my mom spends a lot of Saturday morning in her bedroom mirror, picking her own hair into a huge black and beautiful dome. Which is so completely one hundred percent unfair but she says, *This is the difference between being a grown-up and being a child*. When she's not looking, I stick my tongue out at her. My sister catches me, says, *And that's the difference between being a child and being a grown-up*, like she's twenty years old. Then rolls her eyes at me and goes back to reading.