**I Cannot Tell You of This Dread**

Daniela Paraguya Sow

When my mother and I hug good-bye, her cheek

brushes mine, and my arm wraps around her, never

to let go. Her low cough pierces the air, limbs shaking

inside coral-pink pajamas. I don’t want this to be

the last time I ever see her. What if it is? Panic swells

in my throat, a stormy wave. As I fight

for breath, I look longingly at her tired eyes, dry lips,

sun-spotted skin. Her porcelain hands feel cold

in mine as she says how glad she is that I’ve come.

Suddenly, I want to hear all the stories before they’re gone

from this woman who wears wisdom like a cape.

Who cares that my flight leaves in two hours? On the stoop

tell me about your nursing school days in Manila, Mom,

those times when you waited for your tuition money

to come by boat. Tell me how you slooped by without it

the devastation you felt when your own rich grandmother

from the province refused to let you borrow. Describe

to me when I was three, how hard the New York City snow fell,

the hundred dollars in your pocket, bedding and rent you saved

for. Did angels press dusty shadows against your apartment

windows? Did they tuck away your tearful prayers?

The door: pushed partially open, and my mother coughs again,

uncaps medication. I linger, trying to layer

and laminate this moment into my memory,

an unknowable ache that waits in half-light.