potato

The “apples of the earth,” they’re called in France, and in Spain, “patatas”; but in the Spanish-speaking Americas we call them “papas,” from the Quechua, and they always sit at the center of the table, silent witnesses to the meals that we have or don’t have in our crowded homes.

When I was a child I marveled at the versatility of this vegetable, how it was like a stone but could not break glass, how it was like an apple or a pear but without the sweetness, how it could calm our appetite but could not do away with hunger, which always came back, looking for its empty chair in our dining room.

Yet the potato was always with us, our angel from the ground, our missing piece to the cavity of the hand, the mouth, and the stomach.

I woke up in the middle of the night with a pain in my belly and I stepped off my bed with a mission: I would wake my mother and ask her to fry me a potato—only the sound of the skillet, only the smell of the oil, would comfort me. No, we were not going to starve, despite what Abuelo had said the week before.

As I made my way through the living room, I caught sight of the basket of potatoes on the table: each tiny head asleep
and plump with meat. It was like sneaking into the chicken coop and finding the chicks huddled against the hen. But here there was no hen. We had eaten her. How foolish, I thought. We will never again have eggs.