

Canciones de mi mamá: An Ode to Sandra Cisneros

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Artist's Statement

Inspired by the vignette structure of *The House On Mango Street*, I have attempted to tell my own stories of isolation, displacement, ancestry, and a desert childhood. I placed emphasis through motifs of geography and myth – so, while these vignettes do not necessarily all take place in the same place/on the same street, I believe they are connected in their explorations of space and place. I inserted myself a la “Women on the Edge” and reflected upon what I remain on the edges of: culture and ethnicity, gender, religion, etc. I wanted to craft my own lore and a sort of personal metaphysics through stories that I believe articulate how my values and perspectives of the world were formed and informed. Whether it is a moment of shame or love or loss, all of these tales attempt to articulate the permeability of oneself, while also deeply confronting the idea that children who face traumatic experiences will “forget”, “grow out of it” or “shake it off”. As an adult I can indeed say that I am still thinking of those tears of my childhood, the lonely nights when you think the world is an unaffectionate place, and my deep confusion of where and if there is a space for me to exist.

Reading Cisneros as a younger adolescent, specifically *The House On Mango Street*, I felt unalone and understood in my resentment, rage, yearning and displacement. I very much shared her desire for a house, a room, a simple space to call my own. Her work felt like a warm embrace, and a call to record the things that I saw, because some people would try to tell me differently. To further articulate this urge I thought of iconic photographer Nan Goldin and what she revealed about her artistic purpose in the documentary *All The Beauty And The Bloodshed*: “You grow up being told, ‘That didn’t happen. You didn’t see that. You didn’t hear that.’ And what do you do? How do you believe yourself? How do you trust yourself? How do you

continue to trust yourself? And then how do you show the world that you did experience that, that you did hear that? And so that's the reason I take pictures."

Published in 1984, Cisneros set out to recall and transcribe tales of adolescence as a Chicana girl in 1960s Chicago. Using fictional elements to deeper explore themes of class, sexuality, immigration, and so much more, I believe *The House On Mango Street* is a masterpiece of homage – reclaiming the things that raised her and acknowledging the ability and privilege to come back on her own terms. I was specifically inspired by the vignettes “No Speak English”, “A Smart Cookie”, “What Sally Said”, and “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes”. Similarly, I chose to tackle themes of language and culture, family dynamics and expectations, and leaving behind to come back.

In taking on this creative work further exploring Cisneros' structure and doing a closer reading of each and every sentence, word, and syllable, I began to understand just how intentional and packed each choice is. It became increasingly clear how vulnerable Cisneros had to be with herself, as well as with her audience, and I found myself in awe. Trying to channel a similar voice for my own work came somewhat naturally when deciding what topics to approach, but when it got down to the nitty gritty of what anecdotes and dialogue to choose to convey what I am trying to say – I fell deeper and deeper in love with Cisneros and her wizardry. She writes so simply, for lack of a better word, and yet pulls at the heartstrings of every reader. I can only hope to evoke even a fraction of the emotion that she does.

I attempted to unearth those memories, the things I have left behind, and at times turned away from, to confront these things within myself: religion, generational trauma, and, at its core, an oscillating fusion and separation with my multicultural/mixed background. Growing up in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood in Los Angeles, California to a Mexican Catholic mother

and Irish Catholic father, with three siblings of differing skin tones, I was confused to say the least. Only now, with three years and 3,000 miles of separation, do I begin to crack open the surface, and, as Cisneros so beautifully articulates, “I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free”(110). I return and acknowledge, I do not turn my back, and it sets me free.

Sunland

Mama has always warned me of the things that sneak through the doorway with you. She cried of times when I was a toddler, and she would come crashing in with torn bags full of food for six with birds and bats and stray cats following behind. There was an infamous event when our dog Benito would not stop barking at the baby. Confused, Mama shuffled around, lifting the playpen to reveal the carcass of a flaming amber scorpion, spoiled in the stinging position and all.

Benny yelped and scrambled to grab it by the decrepit claw, carrying it around for a victory lap, in search of praise and valor as if he had executed the thing. I think this was the first time she realized the desert was no place for a child.

We were raised on folktales, myths, stories of men and women that acted with courage and grace. Mama told us of vaqueros and chupacabras and all the other things that dwelled in and conquered the terrain – they taught us to act with reverence to those unforgiving forces.

She would tell me stories of wolves. If I abandoned my chores and left them ‘til dark, she’d mock my fear of the night landscape in a witchy tone “You better run fast, mija. Watch the door, you might let in La Loba!” I would roll my eyes, but as soon as I crossed the threshold I

would grasp the knot of the trash bag, piercing the plastic, and sprint to the camouflaged cans that lined the street, thinking of the legend of the Wolf Woman, the lady who lurked in mountains and crawled through canyons and dried river beds to collect the bones of all desert creatures, and as Mama always added, bad behaving children.

I would look around and double check there were no shadows trying to collect my bones and Mama would let out a mocking howl from the doorstep, then lie about my bravery to appease my frowning face.

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Rain Gutters With No Purpose

A discolored rain gutter ran across our driveway that I walked like a tightrope, my sneakers stressing the pavement as I stepped down from our sun-bleached minivan. It hadn't rained in months.

One day, when the frail piping bent in perfect rhythm, a dusty snake from beneath the debris rose to meet my naked ankles. Maroon squirted onto my light pink ankle socks even after Mama ripped the serpent's jaw from my flesh, leaving a fang intact. From that day forward it was in my bloodstream: I understood the lessons of dry landscapes and appreciated the sacrament it is to drink water at a raised table. Every time those mean Santa Anas blow I'm reminded that just because you build a home somewhere does not mean it will be inhabitable.

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Sunday School

Each morning Mama would pace around our back porch with hands clasped around a pink plastic rosary, its beads draped around a cigarette, flickering with the long drags between

decades. My stomach began to growl each time I heard her mumble “As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, a world without end. Amen.”

Since second grade, I would watch her kiss her leathery hands before scrambling to my seat at the table, pretending I had been there the whole time and not admiring her dedication – that I was just another ungrateful, impatient child.

She would smell of Marlboro Golds, black coffee tainted with dollops of heavy cream, and a strange perfume that reminded me of incense.

On Sundays, I walked six blocks to church in that ugly dress I was always forced into. I kicked my short legs from the splintering bench and fanned my humid face with the parish missal. Beneath me lay a rotting wood drenched in white paint – an attempt to bleach its imperfections – but now it just flaked off and stained the slacks of everyone that took a seat.

When it came time for the homily, those church ladies would gather all of the young children and take them to the preschool classrooms. While the adults indulged in some analysis of the gospel, we sat criss-crossed on the choo-choo train rugs and a lady resembling a crystal bowl of Jell-o told us tales of Jesus as a young boy with a little lamb or how Mary was a blessed mother.

Maybe it was my overactive imagination or the fact that I didn’t understand that Mary wasn’t just a fictional character or one of Mama’s friends, but I used to tell her that I remembered being in heaven, before I chose her as my mother, and that Mary had sparkly silver jelly shoes.

After thirty minutes of paraphrased bible stories we waddled back up the stairs to meet our families. I ran back to Mama, grabbing her arm and pressing her warm, soft skin to my own. She patted down the stray strands of baby hair and kissed my scalp. I took deep inhaled, remembering that cigarette smoke and how marvelous she looked in the early morning sun. I

loved my Mama and wished I could get her to look at me with those kind eyes all the time – her attention felt like a crown. Who needed new jelly shoes when you had your Mama’s love?

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When No One Recognizes You As Family

How do you prove to an outsider that your mother is your mother? Skin, DNA, the strokes of a hairbrush. It was all there, but no one else was seeing it.

There is no choice in ancestry. This has been brewing in me ever since I fed from the breast of my mother.

I remember the day that my mother was no longer a villain. The day it clicked in my brain – the breadth of her sacrifice. I still can’t help but ask if it was worth it...Was it worth it? To birth something unrecognizable? Having to remind your daughter in screaming matches, “I am your mother!”

I can’t help but feel ungrateful thinking of the women that came before me, the men they married, the lives they sacrificed, the culture they erased – all working towards the hope that one day a daughter would be born in a generation that is able to have the freedom that they never had. That would be me. And I don’t know that I would be able to tell them it’s worth it – that I’m better off.

I watched my Guela wither away when I was 16 years old. And no one could understand the complexities of the world trying to burst through. No one knew the names we called each other. The scents of her stone bathroom or the ancient carpeted stairs. No one knew that she would laugh hysterically at the most crude of jokes, but was the most holy woman I’d ever met. No one knew that on her deathbed she forgot everything, except for how to beg in her native tongue. I learned Spanish through her dying breaths.

All of those women that gave up their language, their virginities, their autonomy, their happiness. So that I could marry better, wealthier. Look whiter, be treated differently. Watering down the bloodline to get away from those things that confined – that skin color, that language, that neighborhood.

How do you not disappoint your ancestors? I feel a desire to turn and run far, far away from the things they have bred. It terrifies me to see myself as the final step of erasure. That this could be the ending, or, from their perspective, the beginning. My desire to run right back to where they started, reconnecting with the things they left behind. But I guess that's the point— to do whatever I want. And what I want is to undermine their generations of work.

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We Age Beautifully

At holiday family gatherings my tia would corner me saying, “Mija, three shots of tequila before bed every night. Look at me, I swear by it. It’ll keep your bones from creaking and your skin from wrinkling.”

If she overheard Mama would chuckle, “Ay! Stop that, she has skin like a baby’s culo.”

“Exactly, we age beautifully,” tia refuted.

Aging beautifully became somewhat obsessive. It was never important until the day I started to bleed. Then Mama came home with Nair and tweezers and a bouquet of roses, lecturing me on how not to thin my eyebrows like she did. She picked every hair off in high school but still managed to outline them artfully. And, somehow, I was the only girl of this lineage to not have had her ears pierced as the umbilical cord came off, but she offered to take me to the pediatrician so that I would not attempt a botched hole with ice cubes and apple slices.

She told me what to wear and what to say to get a man to love you, then rambled with awful gossip of awful men such as my bisabuelo who was a train conductor with another family on the other end of his route. Or her prom date who was a charming coworker that tried to cop a feel before they even entered the gymnasium. She would rant about male stupidity and inadequacy until some meditation brought her face to a droop and giggles to a halt, that was always when I was sent to my room.

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Spray Tan

My father was a white man, unlike my half-sister's. We all share eyes of brown innocence and have inherited Mama's anxiety. I notice it in the way I stare at my hips, or cry long hard tears. The way I worry about my olive skin getting too tan in the summer, while my peers ask me what my "secret" is for such a perfect tone. It feels almost sickening, but I know it's their genuine inquiry for they would pay hundreds of dollars if someone could turn it into a spray.

My skin fades back to the complexion of my father's as the days grow shorter – that's a privilege Mama and my sisters don't have. So much so that when I was still a baby being pushed around in the grocery cart strangers would remark "Oh my goodness, so adorable! You're the nanny?" But no, it was Mama's own daughter – skin, bone, blood, disappointment.