

Lili MENDOZA
Selection of short fiction

All of us your voices

to Diego

“...I wonder
whether you saw them, whether you said
words to rid me of those three ladies
nodding by night around my bed,
mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head.”

Sylvia Path. *The Disquieting Muses*

Mom is not well. When she stretches out her arm to reach the sugar bowl her hand shakes and the seven gold bracelets she has worn since her wedding day clink. I am visiting her more often now that my sister has left, dad died, the aunts no longer come and the neighbors ignore her. I visit her more often because only the dogs are left in the yard, stretched out on the over cement among the droppings. Someone has to clean. Mom no longer can, or else has lost interest. She brings the coffee cup to her lips and sips – resoundingly – the hot coffee. She is far gone, no longer feels the burned tongue; doesn't swallow the bread she chews with her mouth opened – resoundingly – full of coffee, all at once, as if that time was the same and the auburn stain left by her cup on the tablecloth wasn't anything other than my clumsy, distant childhood, which might also be hers – resoundingly - the one we try to remove, she and I, later each time, farther each day.

First episode

Mommy puts on our tiny white satin shoes and first communion dresses. She sits us by the table and pours coffee with milk. Takes bread, says grace and breaks it and gives it to her disciples, saying take it and eat. Daddy is due from work any minute. Radio Hogar, it's twenty past three announces the voice coming out of the speaker. Mommy turns the volume button . High. Mommy, I spilled my coffee on myself. So cute, says mom. My sister wipes her fingers on the tablecloth. Mommy, what are we celebrating. Mommy. Mommy. Mamma? Can't hear us. She is pouring herself in, through the speakers, lost in the radio or perhaps waiting for a secret broadcast.

Second Episode

When I come home from school, mom grabs me by the braid and I fly midair, land face first in the living room divider. She now thinks I do drugs. To prove it she has eviscerated the

dolls, one by one, then the stuffed toys. Their foam guts seek hiding places and shake in terror. So do I. On my way to the floor I find two columns of flesh and a pantyhose to blow my nose; no mommy, please, you're crazy; sticks and toys tumble over my head.

A word from our sponsor

Outside a school gate two mothers reunite with their daughters. Mother 1 uses Clean-x with Stain Removing Power, the other, doesn't. The Clean-x mother holds her daughter—the girl with the bright white shirt, the happiest one—and they walk towards the camera in advertising bliss. Zoom in. Continuous. The mother who doesn't use Clean-X hangs her head, maybe out of sheer tiredness because her daughter's shirt is irremediably gray. The mother holds her hand without wanting, daughter flops arms to the side – saddened – perhaps because mom doesn't love her enough; dirty laundry is best washed at home, you pass it through a bucket and a washboard, beat it by fist and stone to remove the stain so that no one knows.

Third episode

Don't let boys touch you. No matter what don't let them grope you or take off your panties. Men only want one thing, you hear? And you better not touch them *there*.

You barge into my room without knocking and camp out on my doll-less bed to tell me stupid shit. One of these days I'm taking off and I ain't coming back; bet you it isn't as ugly out there as you make it sound. You watch me, I'm going to leave. You carry on talking with disgust about men; I stick to combing my hair in front of the mirror. *Whore*, and you sink my forehead on your reflected chest, a curse of seven years of potential kisses so that my head bleeds, the fragments are multiplied and whoever comes after will have trouble sweeping us in the aftermath of splinters and bruises. The beat-up radio reminds me

*Seven years are nothing
the feverish stare
errant in the shadows
seeks and names you*

loca.

Fourth episode

Not without reticence, dad takes her to the clinic. Can't tell if he remembers – I'm thinking as we speak – the time I left for good in a tumult of screams and gossiping neighbors. He now takes her for a checkup because she's convinced that he, who is so old he can't go by himself to the bathroom, has a girlfriend. Between being embarrassed and fed up he calls me at the office to tell me. Each day a new bit, a crisis. She's crumbling like a cookie, he tells me. When we hang up, the static remaining on the line screams [vibrates?] of the things he doesn't mention, and of this detachment of mine, which is also the silence of our long-lost connection.

A week after the checkup the old man calls again. Tells me real quietly that mom is hearing voices. Daddy? Speak louder, I can't hear you, and he answers I can't hon', she hears everything. Dad is pouring out of the phone and I follow? Him, picking up words: disequilibrium, biochemical, paranoia, medication, must not know. Click. As if she and I were others; daughters or inventions of the exiled voices.

A word from our sponsor

A mother and her daughter sit on a terrace, enjoying Café Del Campo: Your morning flavor, 100% organic, finely ground; a coffee to share. On the table finger sandwiches, a sugar bowl, a milk pourer, and porcelain cups with flower motifs. The women speak in silence, their bond so resilient not a word crosses between them. If anything, they look at each other through the vapor floating above their cups and smile. *Fade out. Cut.*

Final episode

I visit you because nobody does. Sometimes, my heart leaping, I medicate you. I ask you to join me at the table and offer you coffee laced with medication, sometimes sandwiches. Sometimes, few times, we manage to laugh or to watch tv.

There are days in which you remind me of my true mother, like when I was a child and you took me to the museum or made me little tutus. On days like those we pull out the photo albums and laugh at the ridiculous hairdos of the aunts, the time drunken uncle Mono hit grams instead of the piñata, when dad was alive. There are others in which we tell each other things we thought forgotten, you because you weren't occupied by voices and forebodings, populated by landmines and ivy; I too, absent, awaiting this calm time in which the demons in your head lay dormant and , for you, I have been freed of mine. You're no less mine, less my mother; never is the thread far from the ball of yarn.

*

From *Corazón de Charol A-go-gó* [Patent Leather Heart A-go-go]

Polaroid

I want to pick myself off from the world like a scab - band aid and iodine – is everything I want he goes on thinking as a column of smoke rises from the back of the chevy. The only footprint I will leave on the world, but it will be visible from the ozone. Street blocks flash in the world's phone switchboard: one call after another and everyone on hold. Pérez is about

to die. A toughie, but he'll manage. Difficult, this dying; the peer pressure, Christ is coming, run; let's hug a tree.

In five seconds him, the chevy and the sandwich he is chewing on will crash into a pole, two bystanders and a pawnshop. He and the sandwich will be propelled through the windshield, thrown by the sheer force of Science. A shame we flunked Basic Physics but a good thing we came because soon we'll confirm that in fact, Newton was right all along.

Pérez does not know it yet but we do, and that's why we observe him from over here; us so neat and tidy, life insurance policies up-to-date and breakfasted already, all bundled up in this fucking cold, standing on the corner between a news rack and the click click clack of an attorney on her way to a hearing. Her we will see again in the eleven o'clock news, her pencil skirt rolled up over exposed hips, stockings torn, no longer hurried, irreparably late.

For now, while we wait, Perez will be looking out the window, distracted. The people he will see on his path will not see him. In three weeks, the tin monster that's left will be sold to a gallery for five hundred dollars and will be called contemporary art. The curator will find it a steal, worthy of celebrating with bubbly and delicate if tiny hors d'oeuvres.

Let's step aside: over here. Not behind the news rack, or you'll miss what I want you to see. Come to this end of the sidewalk so you don't get your hem splattered with sleet. In a fraction of a second we will witness the impact, and right before your eyes you will see emerging first the bread, then the tomato.

Almost there.

Now.

Ghetto Baby

The girl's the kind that can smack you in the head with a beer bottle, just because; 'cause she can and if she did, nobody would believe you. You ask her out. You think she can be sweet: something in her insinuated promise of eyelashes, their shadow on the cheekbone. You ask her out because you think she could be sweet – sometimes – and if she'd wanted to. Hey, you tell her.

First time you saw her it hit you low and hard, one hundred volts through the spine and a tightening of butt cheeks; you swelled in your pants, came a little. Sup' homes all around, she unfurled an umbrella of waxed eyebrows to catch the clouds. The lip-lined peaks of her mouth spread a little. You learn her name, posse says good bye. So do you.

You get home and jack off to the possibility of those eyebrows, the cheap flip-flops, the certitude of lacquer-red nails

and you cum.

You see her again: top of her game; dudes lurking at a distance. You'd talk to her if the thing tightening in your balls wasn't so thick; you sweat, let her go instead.

You finally ask her out; she turns her face to stare at you, clinking the recently un-pawned bangles. She's going to say no and you know it, 'cause the balloon in your crotch deflates and darts from your body like it would at a birthday party. And right then she puckers up and spits on the sidewalk.

A'aight, she says and walks down the alley, giving shouts.

Damn.

The streetlights are suddenly lit.

[...]

The Great Depression

Act I

A Reasonable Citizen

They say that it was the beginning of the end; the big bang of the big Boom; some believed it was brought about by tourists and backpackers in their mad rush towards our shores, others by the mass of white males in their good suits, smelling of cologne, suitcases full of Euros. The economic mattress blew up in our faces and one by one we fell, the poor first, fucked up upon landing. By then I wasn't paying the traffic tickets, kept piling them up. An entire system of imaginary values, rolled up with multicolor rubber bands; Law and Justice, those flirts, in the passenger seat until they began to annoy me and I had to get rid of them. One fine day, shazam! , I stuffed the tickets in the church's collection can; separation of church and my state, I say.

Vaya con Dios.

I think I still had a job then, my belle époque; a home and a car paid for in uncomfortable installments, model citizen by direct debit. Everything in order, my parents proud. Until the house of cards, precariously balanced, fell too and I stopped giving a fuck altogether. The

city was not where it ought be, it was taken from under my feet and now, my balls to the wall and penniless, I receive a sealed letter that reads: Building. Sold. Foreign investors. Plain out ignored it, senile delusions of the landlady. Just as with other important documents, I stuck the letter in the oven. Out loud: up yours. Oven door a wrinkled mouth, black, or inversely, stick your unwanted shit right here. On the kitchen wall my eyes project a quick succession of images (ViewMaster). Blink 1: Impotent bald men from Stockholm embezzle the millions that the old hag should have received. Blink 2: The rich commit suicide en masse, *Lejanos Parientes Indecentes* all snotty-nosed in the news (devastated). Blink 3: Mass media circus; the chaos. Overture: Tannhäuser. Empty pans join in the roar of bass drums and trumpets as I kick shut the oven door, sublime apotheosis of my Wagnerian symphony.

Some days short of the deadline given by Law and Justice, I have nowhere to go. The rocket of survival is now in position; the voice of reason – mechanical and feminine – begins the countdown.

Three. Two. One. Lift-off.

I unfold between the chipped walls, no longer rushed; I'm the Sunday paper, plucked to sections among coffee cups and classifieds, caught in the eternal dance of the roaches.

Act II

Housing Solutions

I curse over the stereo. Two men cross the street and jump onto the sidewalk, like synchronized swimmers. Almost ran them over. The air conditioning is comforting and for a split second I'm distracted by the little tree freshener hanging from the rearview mirror – betcha can't find a little tree that smells like this city, shit and desperation – but this one smells like kool-aid.

Thirty children per kilometer, traffic lights change depending on whose hand reaches out, I turn the corner to where cement monsters tower above pothead jugglers. I gorge on billboards. Ocean View Tower, A Place For the Demanding. I gave up asking way back. I switch lanes so I don't lose sight of the movers. On my way to another roach-infested den, hideouser yet if possible. The fucking GDP. Your Family Deserves the Best. In the rearview mirror, a panorama of the trash bags I left behind by the bins. Best view in town. A mob of homeless crawls up to my trash, sheer terror, Night of the Living Dead, now in a theater near you.

Lame Tuñón - gunshot to the right leg, attempted robbery – has set up shop. Wheels his way to the car, reaches out a styrofoam cup. I roll down the window. He asks if I am leaving. I deposit an I do. The fuck why? What else. Another project financed by progress.

Act III

Employment and Welfare

Text:

Here. Come down.

In the parking lot of a building, a parent waits in the confinement of arrhythmia and tinted windows. Lobby doors open and a Molotov woman walks out, wearing a striped beanie and trench coat; ridiculous – throwing trash bags into a bin with the aim of a union worker, then jumping in a beat-up car and accelerating behind a movers' truck. A mob of homeless is already fighting over her trash. The man's muscles breathe, wait. Upstairs, a woman places a leg on the toilet seat, four inch heel, and randomly shaves that leg with the skill of a vedette. The suitor-client isn't worth the splurge of perfume, so she goes for a knock-off instead. Good luck, best of lucks, she blows a kiss to her reflection and something sparkles in the swing of her hips, the sight of a paid utility bill, a few bucks slipped discretely into her palm, or perhaps the internal dialogue that keeps her sharp and afloat in midst of the chaos, that air of superiority that her roommates understand as an unnecessary mystery.

In her bag she sticks a Paola® in Fire Red, condoms, keys, a cell phone. She is thinking of Chava, sitting by the phone – it's been three days now-, with the innocence of women in their thirties, lots of mileage and an uncertain destination; waiting for someone, anyone, to call, tell her the things she's been told a thousand times in the bedroom of her mind, she a naked Maya laid out on plush cushions nerve endings, but there, stuck to the phone, nailed eye and soul to the device. Every once in a while she picks it up to make sure it's working and not many weeks will pass until she runs into an old schoolmate, or meets a distant cousin of Calin's who came for the funeral of Belkis' stepbrother's dad, until she stuns us again with the demented joy of her chola-cheekbones, until she tells us, between plates passed around the table, this is it, he's the one, I can feel it in my soul, etcetera, etcetera, until the next and back to the same shit. It's never-ending.

Another text:

Come downstairs.

On the way to the door four bellies and a telenovela stick to her back and trail behind her, like a comet's tail, because anything is preferable to being alone, with clean eyes.

**And now, put on your gasmasks
Warning on the back of a cigarette pack**

Smoking causes lung cancer, notice to the left – the image comparing – the lung of a smoker to a healthy lung, belonging we assume to a healthy individual. Smoking causes cardiovascular diseases. The tiny image shows a young man, say thirty to forty five, knocked out, in what can only be an O.R., chest naked, an orphan electrode under the right nipple, while four arms tend to him in what we must assume is an emergency. The pair of arms in the background, it seems, belongs to a woman and, as all smokers are the remaining aberration from the chauvinist past, we'll assume it belongs to a nurse because it would be impossible, just imagine, for a woman to be a doctor. May Christ find us confessed. No, the doctor is the one with the hairy, meaty forearms. The nurse puts an oxygen mask on the patient. We assume the patient is a smoker. We know this because his image is on a pack of cigarettes, because what else could he do after working twelve hours at the liquor store, never a swig, never messing with the numbers, month after month rounding off the world, never lusting after the gigantic buttocks of the secretary, never a sick leave. Smoking is hazardous to your health and can cause cancer, Manolo, cancer. All cigarettes are hazardous to your health and by God, do not sell to minors. We know you well Manolo because your image is on a pack of cigarettes, because what else would you do after your twelve hours amassing the abstraction of another's wealth, never laying a finger on that glorious ass, day after day and at minimum wage. What else is there to do but to exit into the cold night rapped in your trench coat, your face lip up in zippo splendor, accentuated by the orange glow, your eyes darker, deeper, more you now that you take a long drag and exhale your fears one by one, now that your soul takes leave through your nose and mouth.

Translated from the Spanish by the author
