CREATIVE WRITING AND PERSONAL ESSAY

Houses Without Walls

One-Act Play

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This one-act play portrays two generations of women coping with motherhood and madness in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Torn between historical and personal traumas, and love, fear, and resentment for their daughters, Candela and Gloria's stories are almost impossible to tell apart. Each day, without reprieve, they speak to themselves and to each other across a wall. One day, however, the wall no longer holds, and Candela and Gloria come face to face. They simply can't forget—if anything, they remember too much. Likewise, their daughters—now women living in exile—grapple with lives turned upside-down by history and personal choices. Their mothers will die without them. Their own daughters, too, will leave them one day. Ultimately, HOUSES WITHOUT WALLS reminds us that motherhood, like a revolution, is a life-altering event—often wrought with obligation, madness, and pain.

Keywords: Cuba; Cuban Revolution; Mariel Boatlift; immigration; motherhood; violence; political; theater; Latinx theater; Cuban-American theater; exile; Caribbean diaspora

Praise for *Houses Without Walls*

"In *Houses Without Walls* the boundaries between characters that are united and divided by guilt and loss are permeable, resulting in a surreal slippage that is at once connective and isolating. These paradoxical operations in the piece create a rhythmic heaving—the painful contractions of memory. This permeability—the intermingling of the lives of the characters, the shared sounds and smells of their existence, and their overlapping and sometimes identity-bending exchanges—calls to mind the movement of water, of waves overtaking waves. Water in all its potential and horror. Water as both a passage to a new life, as well as the possibility of death.

"When we leave, we take nothing with us."

Yet it is exactly this 'nothing' left behind that is the central presence in *Houses Without Walls*—the oppressive presence of absence. The immensity of a loss and unknowing that sits thick in the air, drowning the inhabitants in the molasses of memories of the past and anxieties of the future. A MUST see." **Juli Crockett, American Playwright & Director**

"Susannah Rodríguez Drissi has found a uniquely theatrical way to convey the inter-generational pathos and humor of displacement, exile and re-connection—this is a deeply lyrical, earthy and compelling piece of theatre." **Guy Zimmerman, Award-Winning Writer, Director & Producer, Padua Playwrights**

"*Houses Without Walls* poignantly shows us the emotional and psychological challenges that Cuban mothers and daughters face during the diasporic conditions following the 1980 Mariel Boatlift. As poetic as it is abstract, this is the language of theatre." **Beatriz Ortega, Producer, Jeronimo Stage. Los Angeles/Madrid | Associate Producer, The Los Angeles Theatre Center**

"*Houses Without Walls* is an eerie and poignant meditation on the violence of separation, of motherhood, and of what it means to be left behind. The musings, ravings and fragile interactions of two mothers left in Cuba by their migrant daughters haunt the empty spaces of their troubled lives, revealing new scenes of hurt in the years of the Mariel exodus from Cuba to the U.S." **Esther Whitfield, Ph.D., Brown University, Author of Cuban Currency: The Dollar and "Special Period" Fiction (2008)**

"Susannah Rodríguez Drissi's *Houses Without Walls* transmits the complicated emotions that can be attributed to slow political and economic violence and its effects on a people. The taste, feel, sounds, and smell of what the experience of distance must feel like to mothers and daughters pervade this one-act play. Despite characters' constant assertion of their difference from one another—a seemingly natural response to a troubled collective environment of 1980s Cuba, *Houses Without Walls* insists upon proximity, disintegrating the walls and forcing us to empathize with all who have endured such a difficult fate." **Jacqueline Loss, Ph.D., University of Connecticut, Author of Dreaming in Russian: The Cuban Soviet Imaginary (2013)**

"Susannah Rodríguez Drissi's *Houses Without Walls* importantly dramatizes the challenges and rewards of being both a mother and daughter in diasporic worlds. The play's narration and dialog are beautifully abstract. In writing this way, Rodríguez Drissi makes it clear that the relationships amidst 1980s Cuba and its Diaspora are both captivating and raw." **Kris Juncker, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art**

"*Houses Without Walls* is an extraordinary work exploring the topical issues of emigration, physical and virtual borders and the difficulty of communication between two generations of women. Rodríguez Drissi uses a language that is both poetic and brutal, the lyrical tones being cut through by sharp notes of realism. The main characters, mothers, and daughters inhabit a space that ensures an emotional and sensorial permeability between geographical zones, between life and death, overseen by a narrator whose role is not to provide spectators with more information but to overemphasize the impossibility of the women's situation. This is a play that clearly captures the pain of physical separation and distance at a time when the plea of refugees and the politically justified need to build walls test our humanity daily." **Carmen Levick, Ph.D., Department of Theatre, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom**

Advertising Postcard for *Houses Without Walls*. Courtesy of the author.

To the women in my family

PREFACE

Houses Without Walls portrays two generations of women coping with motherhood and madness in the aftermath of the 1980 Mariel Boatlift. Candela and Gloria's stories are almost impossible to tell apart. Each day, without reprieve, they speak to themselves and to each other across a wall. One day, however, the wall no longer holds, and Candela and Gloria come face to face. The play premiered to a sold-out audience at the Hollywood Fringe Festival on June 3rd, 2018, at Stephanie Feury Theatre Studio, 5636 Melrose Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90038. It was a finalist for the Inkwell Playwrights' Promise Award and was awarded the 2018 Encore! Producers' Award, the Better Lemons Audience Choice Award, Better Lemons 100% Lemonade Award, and Better Lemons DoubleSweet Show of the Week.

The play was inspired by events the playwright experienced while living in Cuba during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift when Fidel Castro opened the sea border, unleashing a major refugee crisis. "The mothers and daughters of *Houses Without Walls*," Rodríguez Drissi explains, "could be any mother and daughter who have experienced separation, political violence, and the madness that ensues. This play is about walls—the ones we imagine, the ones we build and, ultimately, the ones we must tear down."

Torn between historical and personal traumas, love, fear, and resentment for their daughters, Candela and Gloria simply can't forget—if anything, they remember too much. Likewise, their daughters—now women living in exile—grapple with lives turned upside-down by history and personal choices. Their mothers will die without them. Their own daughters, too, will leave them one day. Ultimately, *Houses Without Walls* reminds us that motherhood, like a revolution, is a life-altering event—often wrought with obligation, madness, and pain.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

NARRATOR, a woman who weaves in and out of scenes, becoming more and more involved in the action as the play progresses.

CANDELA, mid to late fifties, in a house dress and flip-flops.

GLORIA, mid to late fifties, in a house dress and bare feet.

DAUGHTER 1, mid to late thirties, a dress and flip-flops.

DAUGHTER 2, mid to late thirties, a dress and bare feet.

TIME AND PLACE

1985. Havana, Cuba. A small town called Bauta.

SET

Two bedrooms, with kitchen table and stove close by on each side.

There is a rocking chair in each living space,
along with a side table, with picture frames.

A wall divides the space into a right and left bedroom.

COSTUMES

House dresses, well pressed and starched.

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

In the summer of 1980, thousands of Cubans abandoned their homes, family, friends, lovers, and possessions, climbed into a boat and sailed to the United States.

This is a story about mothers and daughters, and the stories they can't forget.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

Two women on either side of the stage. They wear typical batas de casa or house dresses, with excessive talcum (baby) powder on their neck and décolleté. Hair is disheveled. They make lemonade and hum. The humming gets louder, reaches its peak, then tapers off in time for the narrator to speak.

NARRATOR

They are neighbors—and that means something. They live in adjacent houses near the lagoon. With large front doors on either house. On one side, a cry so low only her neighbor can hear it.

CANDELA

Oooh! Oooh!

NARRATOR

On the other, words so vile, they burn through plaster. In both, old wood creaks and marks time spent on rocking chairs.

CANDELA

Whore! *Desgraciada, puta de mierda.*

NARRATOR

Lemonade is only one way to beat the heart's pain into submission.

(On either side of the stage, both women hold a small tin can in their hand filled with lemonade. They stir in brown sugar vigorously. The clinking sound of the spoon against the tin is heard.)

NARRATOR

Between them, a wall, a buffer zone made of brick and mortar. Only one way to be good neighbors. Such a small distance between them, only they can tell each other apart. From one room to another, she can pause to listen to the cushioned stamping of her neighbor's feet, put an empty milk can to the wall. Move away quickly, if necessary—or just linger for the pleasure of it. Daily habits call out a necessary, acoustic distance between them. On one side, flip-flops splash on wet marble tiles; on the other, metal spoons clink against aluminum cups. Out of round, but filled to the rim with water, lemon juice, and sugar. Beyond their kitchens, a lagoon. Thick with bullfrogs and human waste, it grows grim around the mouth. Runs shame, on both their houses. If face-to-face, they never ask ...

María Ignacia Hojas (NARRATOR) from: Isa Salaabi/*Daily Bruin*.
Courtesy of the author.

CANDELA

Did you hear from your daughter today?

(walks to rocking chair, sits down. She drinks her lemonade, rocks, and giggles.)

GLORIA

Has she written yet?

NARRATOR

Maybe they talked to others, to each other, five years earlier, soon after it all went sour—after each daughter fixed her heart on leaving. Because breathing was better than staying behind. But they gradually learned not to ask. There are empty spaces that they know they share, but have to be respected—those days without end when there are no pictures in photo albums to explain the past, or words in dictionaries to heal the wound left by the missing. They simply need to be left alone.

CANDELA

I've gotten away with something. Can't remember what it was, though. *(tapping her head)* Can't remember, damn it.

NARRATOR

Like she'd told too many lies to keep track of.

CANDELA rises abruptly from the rocking chair and walks to the kitchen table. She chops a few tomatoes, then onions ... Crushes two heads of garlic in a paper bag with the back end of a glass jar. Adds oil to a pan and throws it all in, watching it sizzle.

NARRATOR

She should just let the house burn down, with her in it.

CANDELA

So freaking easy ... *(she leans into the flame)* All I'd have to do is lean on the flame a little and let my clothes catch on fire. Then it would just be a matter of letting flames do their thing, wouldn't it?

NARRATOR

She can't do that. She'd never do that. What would her neighbor think?

GLORIA

Bad mother *(swatting mosquitoes with the back of a hand)*.

NARRATOR

But it's not like she hasn't thought about it often enough ... keep the plastic tank of kerosene by the bedside, light a match. It's not like killing oneself is a crime. Or is it?

GLORIA

It's not.

CANDELA

Are you sure?

GLORIA

I know.

GLORIA

(to the wall.)

You'd be a martyr, then. A *mamá* so broken and betrayed by a daughter's leave-taking she'd set herself on fire—that's what they'd all say. *Se dio candela, se quemó*, they'd say.

NARRATOR

Just watch, she thinks. Just watch what I can do.

CANDELA
(singing)

EL CUARTO DE TULA,
LE COGIÓ CANDELA,
SE QUEDÓ DORMIDA
Y NO APAGÓ LA VELA...

NARRATOR

If you sing about it, she thinks, you kill the urge.

GLORIA

Stop that! A mother's job is to stay well planted in one place. When the child come home, she'll know where to find you. (*scratching her scalp and tugging on her hair*) Too old to grow new roots and grow more hair.

*Pulls her hair again, as if
trying to make it grow. She
stares out through the back
door toward the lagoon,
evading white sheets
hanging on wooden
clothespins to reach the
water's edge.*

CANDELA

You crazy bitch. You love to talk to yourself. I can hear you. I know all about it, too. I've been listening to you for years, you hear me?

(singing)

TUS AMIGOS
NO SON LOS DEL MUNDO
PORQUE TE OLVIDARON
EN ESTE RINCÓN.
NOSOTROS NO SOMOS ASÍ.
TE QUIERE LA ESCOBA Y EL RECOGEDOR.
TE QUIERE EL PLUMERO Y EL SACUDIDOR.

GLORIA

(looking out toward the lagoon.)

Look at it, it means to lay us to rest one day.

CANDELA

Cross it out! Cross it out! It means no such thing. It's just a stinking lagoon—that's all.

(she plugs her nose.)

NARRATOR

A viscous smell, more swamp than lagoon, clings to her nostrils. Midday, and it's all so bleak, so torpid. Sometimes, though, when frogs jump to their death from sunburned roofs and it's just too hot to keep one's own private matters private, one of them breaks the silence.

GLORIA

She's going to hell! I wish her well, but hell's hotter than a monkey's ass.

(she hears her neighbor shouting from the other side of the wall.)

Yelina de Leon (CANDELA). From: Isa Salaabi/*Daily Bruin*.
Courtesy of the author.

CANDELA

And she's gonna snap, crackle, and pop.

NARRATOR

Her twitchy lips murmur, as if it's her duty to finish what the other one started. Both close by—both playing. But not with each other. Only in the neighborly presence of each other. Each a close witness to the other's life.

GLORIA

(hand cupped around a sour mouth, playing telephone on the wall.)

You shouldn't say that about your own flesh. Your own baby girl.

CANDELA

Why the hell not?

GLORIA

It's wrong.

CANDELA

I only wish they'd—

(flip-flops sauntering away from the wall.)

GLORIA

They probably already have.

CANDELA

So be it. They call it labor for a reason. It's real work ... they split you open, like a goddamn watermelon. They probe, and poke, and stretch, and tear at your insides. All that wailing, and panting, and pushing. All that ripping, from end to end. It never heals. I still can't sit on it—it burns! It burns! And the gas, the gas trapped inside you—it got to come out.

NARRATOR

On one side, white rice spreads across a wooden table. Water comes slowly to a boil. On the other, her small hands grow idle. Fingers grip picture frames and bundles of childhood drawings. A little house with a dog, on one. A bicycle on broken pavement, on another. It all grows silent again, until the other's turn to be it. Then it isn't so much angry words as calloused feet tapping cool tile and fingers laced to rosary beads.

GLORIA

(in a fit of laughter, holding on to her rosary beads.)

In one giant fart heard around the world, Amen.

CANDELA

Prosaica, so vulgar. You must have been raised in a goddamn barnyard ... who taught you that? Your *mamá*? The one from the lagoon?

GLORIA

(she goes on ignoring the other's comments, her questions.)

They work so much there—to the bone's marrow. There's no time there, only for working or dying. She doesn't write. She doesn't call. She's fine, then. Yes, fine.

(wiping the morning's breadcrumbs from the kitchen counter.)

CANDELA

Like hell, she's fine. She's got you duped. And don't you forget the bulging eyes, and all that clenching and straining. And the smell, like a tub of lard. And when they finally get their head stuck into your you-know-what-some-people-call-that, it's too late to shove them right back in. Suck 'em back in like a vacuum cleaner, but they won't go back. They just hang there, upside down, turning from a dark red, to blue, to purple, like some strange fruit. Oh, you can try real hard, but they born anyway.

GLORIA

Maybe a *ciruela*? Dark, like a prune. Baby's crowning, they say. No royal blood in this one, though. She's a lagoon baby, like her *mamá*, and her *mamá* before her. Blood as thick as molasses.

CANDELA

Molasses?

GLORIA

Swamp water, I say. A swampy, stinking baby, that's right.

CANDELA

"Oh, you're screwed now, real screwed," your *mamá* will say. 'Cause at fourteen, what the hell do you know about babies dropping like mangoes from between your legs. You know shit, that's what you know. Shit. *Y te cagas en el día en que nació*. 'Cause, even then, you know it's all for nothing, 'cause it's hard work. Real hard. You can't just walk away from them. You can't just forget to feed them, and wash them, and squeeze them until their face turns blue. You're stuck. And that's only the beginning.

GLORIA

A letter came today. A picture's in it.

*Her chapped hands shaking a
moistened rag into the sink.
The crumbs fall and
stick to yellowed porcelain.*

CANDELA

Let me guess, you'll be grand*mamá* again. The third one's the charm, they say.

*(buoyed by these last words,
she turns the knob on the faucet
and lets the water run.)*

GLORIA

So pretty in the photo. She looks like she can't handle the weight of her own belly, though.

NARRATOR

Occasionally, they allude to things nobody knows but them.

CANDELA

She's her *papá's* daughter. Crooked mouth, just like him. The arms a little too short for the body, too long and wide in the middle. Got nothing from me. Nothing.

GLORIA

Nothing except ...

CANDELA

Except what?

GLORIA

I don't want to say it ...

CANDELA

Bitch.

GLORIA

Uhhh, looks like the weight of the belly's too heavy for such a small frame. Like her *mamá*.

(her hand curbs over an invisible belly.)

CANDELA

Why do you say that?

GLORIA

Isn't that why she left you?

(emboldening the crumbs with her nails. The water runs and all go down the drain.)

CANDELA

Why did yours leave you?

GLORIA

Children leave.

CANDELA

They leave *you*.

GLORIA

(starts humming.)

NARRATOR

Then, they stop talking. The only sound is the clinking of aluminum against spoon. And the usual humming from the other side of the wall, like a lullaby. It stops, then starts again.

CANDELA places a plate of rice on the table. GLORIA prunes her lips on lemonade. Not enough sugar, but there's none left to add. She holds up her spoon, and fixes her eyes on the smudged silver handle. With the corner of the tablecloth, she wipes it vigorously to a faint luster and holds it close. Sees in it.

GLORIA
(grimacing)

A mouth more sour than my neighbor's drink.

The humming continues, monotonously. Flies gather near GLORIA's face, she swats them away with her hand, then lets them be. She then looks around, as if expecting someone else. Sunlight enters the kitchen through the patio door catching specks of dust mid-air. Dust that lifts from wooden chairs, tables, benches, pots and pans piled high atop oily counters. Dust suspended by the light. She sets the spoon down and leaves the soup to the flies.

GLORIA
(dancing, almost jerking around the room.)

All this damn dust reminds me of all those fucking things she's said ... (gestures to the other side of the wall), but I can't see them in the light. Like blobs, no shape of their own. They just hang there, to remind me.

CANDELA drinks from her aluminum cup. One cube of ice melts quickly near the middle, as she fans the flies with an open hand. Suddenly, the lights go out.

CANDELA
(guttural and drawn out.)

No!

GLORIA
(throws a cup against the wall and the sound of something shattering is heard.)

Recoño!

First, CANDELA lights a candle, then GLORIA lights a candle. The stage is in semidarkness.

NARRATOR

Sometimes, when the lights go out, when neighbors perch on porches teeming with mosquitoes and rumors. When they know others listen for prey to pounce on in the dark, the two of them tell stories.

GLORIA

She writes so much I have no place left for letters.

CANDELA

She's a good girl. Loves her *mamá*. The new dress suits you. She knows your taste.

GLORIA

She says all's so nice there. That there's too much of everything, and aluminum cups are priced expensive—Go figure! The tickets are bought. She says that, too. She's coming home 'cause he makes good money and she's got summers off. A good life, my little one's landed.

CANDELA

Sure thing she comes on the same flight as my little queen. You can't keep them apart.

GLORIA

Good girls, they are. They don't forget their *mamás*.

CANDELA

How will they recognize us?

GLORIA

We'll wear the hat, with gardenias on it, like some black and white movie. They'll know.

CANDELA

Dos gardenias. Two.

(singing)

*DOS GARDENIAS PARA TI
CON ELLAS QUIERO DECIR
TE QUIERO, TE ADORO, MI VIDA
PONLES TODA TU ATENCIÓN
QUE SERÁN TU CORAZÓN Y EL MÍO.*

GLORIA

They're coming home. Nothing's been ruined.

CANDELA

Nothing.

GLORIA

The sky, nothing like the sky here. No stars there, they'll say.

CANDELA

You think?

GLORIA

I know.

CANDELA

And what will they say about the weather?

GLORIA

About the weather they'll say that there's no summer like our summer.

CANDELA

And about our beaches?

GLORIA

*(looks to her hands and imagines sand
running through her fingers.)*

See our sand, white, like talcum powder? They don't have that there.

CANDELA

You think?

GLORIA

I know.

CANDELA

(looking toward the audience.)

Is that their plane in the distance?

GLORIA

I think it is. *(she turns to a picture of Camilo Cienfuegos on the wall)* Amigo Camilo ... he's coming back, too! *(laughs)*

CANDELA

Camilo Cienfuegos?

GLORIA

(she nods.)

Ese mismito. Camilo One Hundred Fires. Look at that hat, and that smile. *Alucinante*, what a man! *(singing to the melody of "Guantanamera")* CAMILO, CAMILO ONE HUNDRED FIRES ...

CANDELA

(clicks her tongue and shakes her head.)

It's the only plane that's supposed to arrive today.

GLORIA

Then it must be it.

CANDELA

You think?

GLORIA

I know.

NARRATOR

Like children, they believe in these stories. Pillows that let them land on something soft at night. Let the others pass the heat and beat the bugs with harmless banter. Let them lick their lips and drool and know the rabbit's so close they could taste it. They won't give them none of it. None of the tender morsels. None of the juice. But often, the power doesn't return for days.

María Ignacia Hojas (NARRATOR) from: Isa Salaabi/*Daily Bruin*. Courtesy of the author.

GLORIA

Fucking light, *luz de mierda* ... where the hell have you gone?

CANDELA

(sound of her body knocking into things.)

Ay! Ay, *coño*! I'm going blind!

NARRATOR

Flies drown in warm lemonade. Flip-flops go missing in the dark. Hands and feet succumb to tremors. The heart turns over in its shell. And all hell breaks loose.

On one side, she scrapes her stubby nails on her scalp. One by one, she counts the hairs—not enough. She taps the clearing on her scalp and rounds a hairnet on her head. Tucks in wisps around the temples with anxious fingers.

CANDELA

If only I could blink not too much, sleep more better, I'd have more hair.

(she tugs at the straps of her bra, lifting her heavy breasts and letting them free fall back into place.)

GLORIA

Nothing to do ... *(she sighs.)* It's unnatural.

She digs into her bra and pulls out a little paper bundle with matches. Extends her arms out into the dark with open palms, and feels for the mesh candle in the kerosene lamp in the bedroom. Strikes a match and lights the lamp. Swats the flies that gather near her face, as if this is the source of her pain. The flame goes out. She inhales loudly.

NARRATOR

The passing smell of smoke reminds her of childhood: fire in her family home. Her father lapped up by flames, shouting at her mother for help. Her mother paralyzed, arms hanging listless around her. Her brothers and sisters hiding under a bed, pulling with nervous fingers pieces of mattress fluff through mesh wires, learning how to follow through with ugly threats. She stood beside her mother until he collapsed. There was nothing left to do but throw water on the charred mess and let the smoke subside. If the neighbors hadn't burst in through the back door and rushed them out of the house, they would have burnt to a crisp. Just like her dad. Once the flames are on you, she'd learned, it's too late to turn back. One night, she begins to work on the wall. At first, it's a butter knife. Then, a rusty nail. Then, when neither works, she taps lightly on the wall.

CANDELA

(tapping lightly on the wall.)

You there?

NARRATOR

The other responds in kind.

GLORIA

(tapping lightly on the wall.)

CANDELA and GLORIA work as one, each on their respective side of the wall. They scratch at the wall with their nails, they probe and bang on it with their fists. When that doesn't work, they each bring a hammer. They bang on the wall with the hammer until a small hole appears. As soon as it does, they each pull up a rocking chair to the wall and sit in it, rocking back and forth. Once in a while, they each throw a furtive look at the hole in the wall.

NARRATOR

They scratch and probe through the night. When not enough progress is made, they find their hammers. Long they toil at the wall until one night, a small hole. On either side, a rocking chair.

CANDELA

In this rocking chair, I held my small breast to her. I hadn't much milk. She cried way too much. She suckled like a baby pig and got nothing. I could have gone insane. *Mamá* forced corn silk tea on me. Good for the milk, but not for the hair, she'd said. I threw it up often, but enough went in one day ... and, finally, my right breast dripped. She bit me, the little swampy bitch, cracked my nipple in half. I felt the pain shoot at me from the tip of the nipple all the way to the heart. I was never any good as a mother. I cried way too much, too. Lost my patience. Smacked her upside the head a few good times, too. She liked to drag her feet nearing the preschool. Then I'd lift her by the arm and spank her right where she sits. I never left a bruise, though. Never caused her real harm. My hand was no good. But I knew how to boil diaper cloths to keep them white. I learned to sew and my foot never left the pedal. I made her pleated dresses. Bows and bonnets to match. It all went away when he did.

*(she pauses, rocks a little,
gives the other one a chance.)*

GLORIA

I don't remember much. She was already five when we came to the lagoon. This rocking chair came later, much later. You see, the other family left it behind. Never did figure out who they were.

Magdalena Emar (GLORIA) from: Isa Salaabi/*Daily Bruin*. Courtesy of the author.

NARRATOR

She can hear her laugh. Clearly, it is a laugh. She lets her continue.

GLORIA

She was my first and last. Came in the middle of the night, ripping flesh apart. Ugly like her father. Bald. More like a toothless rat than a human child. But I loved her at first sight. Hot and doughy, sticky. Gangly legs and toothpick arms. Tubby-tubby belly. I knew she'd never find a husband, but who needs that in their life? She'd be somebody. Now where's she at? At the bottom of the ocean—that's where.

CANDELA

Don't say that. Please, don't say that. You don't know that.

*(she rocks faster, losing track of time.
Feet pushing back on tile to gain speed.)*

GLORIA

I have a letter and a picture.

CANDELA

You got nothing like that.

GLORIA

Say it.

CANDELA

I won't.

GLORIA

I'll say it for you.

CANDELA

No, I'll do it. Let me do it.

(she brings the rocking to a halt.)

GLORIA

Go ahead, then.

NARRATOR

Pauses on each salty M.

CANDELA

They couldn't stand their *mamás*. That's why they left. They wanted to be nothing like us. They hated your dresses. Shamed by my flip-flops and my prune mouth. They had no dads. We gave them nothing. Your milk dried up too soon. I gave mine up to someone else's baby. You kicked yours out when it got too hard. Left her homeless. You loved your boy better than your girl.

*(she gestures, as if hurling
her words at the wall.)*

CANDELA

He needed me.

GLORIA

So did she.

CANDELA

She's strong as an ox.

GLORIA

So is he.

CANDELA

He's sick.

GLORIA

You made him that way.

CANDELA

What do you know?

GLORIA

I hear things.

CANDELA

You hear nothing.

GLORIA

You called yours names one wouldn't call a dog.

CANDELA

It served her right. She got wild. Had a tunnel right between her thighs. *(slaps her own mouth.)*

GLORIA

A traitor, like her dad. That's why she doesn't write.

CANDELA

That's horrible, don't say that.

GLORIA

They're at the bottom of the ocean, then. Having the time of their life.

CANDELA

I'll break down the wall.

*(her closed fists pounding
on whitewash near the hole.)*

GLORIA

There's no need for that. I'll stop.

CANDELA

(nursing on knuckles in her mouth.)

No, go ahead.

GLORIA

Their naked bodies swollen by seawater. Cheeks sunken by hunger and salt. Skin blistered by the sun. Knees scraped against the reef. Fingers cut. Lungs distended with sand. Both split open across the chest by sharks.

NARRATOR

Her words spread like moss on either side of the wall. She listens closely. Open windows bring in the rambling porches of other neighbors. Their houses so clean she could lap up the gloss from the floor. In hers, she can't get rid of the dust. So shameful—if someone were to knock on her door or look through the window, they'd find her there. Covered in dust. She pins her eye to the hole. Makes out a face in the dark and settles there.

GLORIA

I see them. They talk. Their bodies more and more clearly, in a nice fishing boat headed to the other side. *(squinting)* They're so close.

CANDELA

They grip the bottom with gray hands. Algae grow out of their eyes. *(her lips moving near the wall.)*

GLORIA

They laugh. They make plans to write. Mine brushes the hair away from her eyes. Yours stands up, waves hello or goodbye.

CANDELA

The raft is gone. The sea has locked them up.

GLORIA

They're so full of life. So young, still. The sun's made them tan. When they get there, they'll blend in. Everyone's tan there. They go to the beach too much. Like in *Jaws*. Everyone's tan.

CANDELA

I knew they wouldn't make it. I told you so. (*chewing beyond her nails.*)

GLORIA

I'm no good as a mother.

CANDELA

Don't say that. You couldn't have known.

GLORIA

It's unnatural. What do we learn from watching our babies die?

CANDELA

You learn nothing.

GLORIA

You think?

CANDELA

I know.

NARRATOR

The lights are back, but it's too late to make a difference. The others recoil into their houses. Chatter resumes. Televisions turn on. Someone finds her glasses right where she left them. They grow silent. One holds a letter in her hand. The other one rocks. They hum. They stare at the hole in the wall. On either side, a house so full of dust, neither one makes out her hands in the light. Neither one knows if one daughter is dead or if one daughter doesn't write.

CANDELA

(*beating on the wall with an open palm.*)

Do you smell that? There's smoke in the kitchen.

GLORIA

No.

CANDELA

There's a fire.

GLORIA

I know.

CANDELA

I'm a good neighbor.

NARRATOR

She knows that, too.

Lights out.

*CANDELA and GLORIA exit the stage in the dark.
ENTER DAUGHTER 1 and DAUGHTER 2.*

NARRATOR

Almost far enough to escape the fire, the daughters, too, they speak.

DAUGHTER 1

It's hot!

NARRATOR

The one says.

DAUGHTER 2

Scorching!

NARRATOR

Says the other. They live as far apart from each other as time and distance have allowed. They resemble their mothers, too. *Como dos gotas de agua. Las patas de gallo*, the cracked heels, *las muecas y los achaques*, the wispy hair, like a rat's. Only *they* can tell each other apart.

Lights on.

DAUGHTER 1

Ma, Mami, I am a mother, too, now. And I've sown my daughters to the hem of my clothes. I've tucked them into every fold of my skin. (*lifting her shirt to show her belly*) Ironed them, like decals, onto my belly. They won't leave me. I didn't drown then. I'm drowning now. My own daughters grow, in spite of me. They suck me dry. They gnaw at my best ideas, ma. They leave me empty. I can't think. (*she shouts*) They tire me out!!! Mami. Ma, they want me gone, so they can grow.

DAUGHTER 2

Tell me about it—the taller they get, the more my back curves. Their cheeks, like rosebuds; mine, sunken. Sacrifice, it's a joy, though. Their *abuela* would be proud. 'Cause they won't leave the house with long hair dripping water. 'Cause they won't do nasty things in the dark.

Magdalena Emar (DAUGHTER 2) from: Isa Salaabi/*Daily Bruin*.
Courtesy of the Author.

DAUGHTER 1

Mother, *madre que la parió, hija de puta, madre patria*. Motherboard, motherload, motherfucker, *mamá, mima, mami, ma, mamita*.

DAUGHTER 2

Oh, child-rearing's a miracle. She sucks at my breast, Mom. It's like, I have no words. I haven't shut my eyes to sleep in years.

DAUGHTER 1

A little Benadryl, wouldn't it be nice? They'd sleep like babies, wouldn't they?

DAUGHTER 2

Babies don't sleep. Whoever said that first was not a mother—couldn't have been. Just a spoonful, just enough to shut my eyes.

DAUGHTER 1

I didn't want to be like her.

NARRATOR

What was wrong with her?

DAUGHTER 1

She loved him better.

NARRATOR

It's not about him. You left.

DAUGHTER 1

She wanted me out.

NARRATOR

You wanted to leave.

DAUGHTER 1

If you shut your eyes, you lose.

NARRATOR

I've already lost.

DAUGHTER 1

No, this is a game. And if you shut your eyes, you lose.

DAUGHTER 2

We already lost. We left and they stayed. Nobody won, don't you remember?

DAUGHTER 1

How could I forget?

DAUGHTER 2

When I finally tell her I'm leaving. She pins her eyes to mine. She's terrified by me. I'm terrified by what I've done. To leave nothing. To leave everything. To leave is to fail. To die. To disappear. To leave is to rip us apart. To tear her down. To kill her. She knows she's failed me—I've failed her, too. *Somos tal para cual*. Because in this goddamn place, in this town, in this country, on this island, everything fails, including her. Specially her.

DAUGHTER 1

And she punished you. She told.

DAUGHTER 2

She didn't tell. *They* told.

NARRATOR

Who's they?

DAUGHTER 2

They's everybody.

DAUGHTER 1

It doesn't matter. Once they knew, they were on us. Like animals. Like we were animals.

NARRATOR

I hear the humming, too. They come from schools, and jobs, and housework in buses, on foot, and on rickety bicycles, wielding bats, bottles, lengths of rusty pipes, chains, and anything else they find along the way. Windows shatter and they break in, dragging bodies out through front doors and broken glass, over cracked sidewalks, and in and out of potholes. Tearing flesh and breaking bones. Someone somewhere hangs themselves. Animals. Neighbor against neighbor—it's criminal, that's what it is. The island's turned against itself. Bastards, like you.

DAUGHTER 2
(to the narrator)

Who told you that?

NARRATOR

I was there, too. I climbed into the bus and shouted, until my lungs bled. Until I bled my lungs. To my mother, to my daughters. Then I, too, left.

DAUGHTER 1

What did you shout?

DAUGHTER 2

I can't say. (slaps her own mouth)

NARRATOR

Say it.

DAUGHTER 1

Say it!!!

DAUGHTER 2

I won't speak. I'll cut out my tongue before I spit the words out.

DAUGHTER 1 NARRATOR

Say it!!!

DAUGHTER 2

You're her spitting image. You shout.

DAUGHTER 1 NARRATOR

Say it!!!

DAUGHTER 2

*QUE SI NO TIENEN ENTRAÑAS, QUE SE VAYAN PARA ESPAÑA.
QUE SI SON UNOS CEBÚ, QUE SE VAYAN PA'L PERÚ.
Y SI NO TIENEN MANDINGA, QUE SE VAYAN PA' LA PINGA!!!*

*DAUGHTER 1 covers her ears and hides under
furniture.*

NARRATOR

PIN, PON, FUERA, QUE SE VAYA LA GUSANERA!!!

DAUGHTER 2

GUSANAS, ESCORIAS, LUMPEN ... QUE SE VAYAN, QUE SE VAYAN!!!

When we leave, we take nothing with us. It rains, but nothing changes. Rain fills the potholes, seeps through crevices, soaks our clothes, and chills the bones. Our hair drips, the lagoon floods, and the water rises and rises, but we leave anyway—in spite of the rain, in spite of the flood.

We leave them behind. Our mothers, in the rain shouting at the car, shouting at us. Flip flops snapping apart as they run, leaving their bare feet to tread water. We climb into the small raft, and we leave. We don't look back.

Yelina de Leon (DAUGHTER 1) from: Isa Salaabi/*Daily Bruin*. Courtesy of the author.

DAUGHTER 1

(she writes on the wall: hija de puta, malparida, escoria, tortillera, mojón, singá.)

Look at the wall. Look at what they've written on the wall.

DAUGHTER 2

(runs to erase it)

Take it out. Erase it. They lie.

DAUGHTER 1

When we leave, we don't take anything with us. They stride up and down outside our houses urging us to go. To hurry. To never come back.

DAUGHTER 2

I place a few pictures in a small box, along with one baby tooth.

DAUGHTER 1

I take nothing. I yank her by the hand, but she roots her bare feet in the ground—I lose them in all that water.

DAUGHTER 2

The wind blows when we leave the town behind. It never stops raining. The water never stops rising.

DAUGHTER 1

Someone in the crowd motions us to hurry. *Apúrense, apúrense*, they say, *que se quedan!!!* The boat is anchored just outside the pier—it beats against the rocks, he says.

DAUGHTER 2

I call out to her, Mami!!! She's never too far.

DAUGHTER 1

But she's not there?

DAUGHTER 2

I don't know. The deck's so crowded, I can't see her. The boat sways and the wind drowns out my voice. Pain crawls along my temples—and the boat begins to move.

DAUGHTER 1

I shout, We have to turn around!!

DAUGHTER 2

I work my way across the deck. One body at a time, I elbow, shove, push against the crowd. They try to hold me back, but I lean over the gunwale, and fling myself into the waves.

DAUGHTER 1

You go back?

NARRATOR

That's not how it happens. You know it's too late.

DAUGHTER 2

I know.

DAUGHTER 1

We don't know if we drown, or if we survive. We don't write. We don't send pictures.

DAUGHTER 2

Pictures lie.

DAUGHTER 1

You think?

DAUGHTER 2

I know.

NARRATOR

Do you smell something?

DAUGHTER 1

Is it smoke?

DAUGHTER 2

Where is it coming from?

NARRATOR

From behind the wall.

DAUGHTER 2

Are you sure?

NARRATOR

I know.

DAUGHTER 1
(to the narrator)

You remind me of my mother.

NARRATOR

She's behind the wall.

DAUGHTER 1

Are you sure?

DAUGHTER 2 NARRATOR

I know.

Yelyna De Leon, María Ignacia Hojas, Magdalena Emar (CANDELA/NARRATOR/GLORIA) from: Isa Salaabi/*Daily Bruin*. Courtesy of the author.

END

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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