

Christmas, 1970

By Sandra M. Castillo

We assemble the silver tree,
our translated lives,
its luminous branches,
numbered to fit into its body.
place its metallic roots
to decorate our first Christmas.
Mother finds herself
opening, closing the Red Cross box
she will carry into 1976
like an unwanted door prize,
a timepiece, a stubborn fact,
an emblem of exile measuring our days,
marked by the moment of our departure,
our lives no longer arranged.

Somewhere,
there is a photograph,
a Polaroid Mother cannot remember was ever taken:
I am sitting under Tia Tere's Christmas tree,
her first apartment in this, our new world:
my sisters by my side,
I wear a white dress, black boots,
an eight-year-old's resignation;
Mae and Mitzy, age four,
wear red and white snowflake sweaters and identical smiles,
on this, our first Christmas,
away from ourselves.

The future unreal, unmade,
Mother will cry into the new year
with Lidia and Emerito,
our elderly downstairs neighbors,
who realize what we are too young to understand:
Even a map cannot show you
the way back to a place
that no longer exists.

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Born in Havana, Cuba, poet Sandra Castillo moved to Miami, Florida, with her family in 1970. Castillo earned both her BA and MA in creative writing from Florida State University. Castillo's early life in Cuba was shaped by her extended family—including a large cast of uncles and aunts—as well as the stories and ever-present possibility of immigration to the United States. Her poetry often draws on these childhood experiences, referencing an uncle's photographs, relatives' arrests, and the streets and lives left behind. She teaches at Miami Dade College in Florida.

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