

Harina de Castilla

By Sandra M. Castillo

“All accounts of the past are made up of possibilities.”
—*Dionisio Martinez*

for Larry Villanueva

i.
For years,
you were a story of ancestors,
pre-revolutionary Cuba:
Barrios, Donate, Gallata, Villanueva,
family names strung and pearled in the Caribbean
by blood and memory,
nostalgia and calamity
en Artemisa, a small town in my mother’s childhood,
a woman in December of 1967,
your Tía Marta, a hospital room en la Covadonga,
rows and rows of children, my sisters,
unexpectedly two, your cousins,
whose clothes Mae and Mitzy wore
into history and exile.

En el exilo, La Cuba del Norte,
ten years after the summer of El Mariel,
you were my map of Cuba,
un espejo, un reflejo,
a tisa-blue knot of possibility.
Mi esquina Habanera,
a street en la arquitectura del pasado,
a superficial distance in the patina of memory,
a me I had never really known,
a language I had learned not to think in.

Later, you were a face on T.V.
en Guadalupe, María Elena,
my mother’s telenovelas en el canal 23,
an actor, a director, a sculptor, abstract angst with a face
history and coincidence had given me.

ii.
So when you become fingerprints and words,
a noun, a verb, a snapshot in motion,
I am no longer alone with my ghosts,
las sombras de el pasado, inventing truth,
reclaiming language, my old self.

I am me, unadorned by speech,
English or translation;
I am an I, simple, exposed,
this afternoon in our lives,
a conversation about the circle
of coincidence and persuasion,
a photograph of an idea we once were,
and you are familiar,
somehow.

iii.

Constantly returning,
we breathe in Spanish,
move through blank spaces like incantations,
waiting for words to fill a moment
(often ninety miles long)
with etymology, jargon, ghostwords,
shadows and nostalgia,
and become Harina de Castilla, Larry,
re-shaped, translated, improvised, sculpted
and redefined.

Notes:

The epigraph of this poem was originally omitted in the changeover to the new website. Because of this, reciting the epigraph is optional for the 2019-2020 Poetry Out Loud season.

Sandra M. Castillo, "Harina de Castilla" from *My Father Sings, to My Embarrassment*. Copyright © 2002 by Sandra M. Castillo. Reprinted by permission of White Pine Press.

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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.