

## Oye La Voz

Excerpt from *The Mothers: Memoir in Progress*

*There was a time when Sky and Earth were one. The world shaped like a gourd, its upper and lower halves still holding snugly to the other. One could simply lift one's palm and brush the heavens. This was before Sky withdrew from Earth, the two worlds retreating to separate borders. On the one side aye, the tangible world of the living. On the other orin, the spiritual realm of gods and ancestors. Between them a scrim so thin one could almost still touch the other side.*

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“What have you come for?” Madelaine asks. And there it is, the question I’ve been circling ever since I first heard of the man who talked with the dead. How in trance he called upon El Cimarrón, the 19<sup>th</sup> century slave who helped him cross the spirit world, connect with those who were only thought to be lost.

In the grant proposals I’d written to get here, I hadn’t dared speak of Madelaine. With friends, I’d treated the possibility of this visit like a lark, exaggerating the more salacious details. Omitting the part I kept secret even to myself. That I’d come not as observer but participant. That I wanted desperately to talk to my mother.

It had been decades since I’d heard her voice, the sound of it filling our house with scales and arpeggios as she washed the dishes. Pouring out the front door to call me in from a game of flash light tag in the cul-de-sac. “Beeeeecky, it’s time to come in for diiiiinner.”

No one called me Becky anymore. I was Rebecca, with job titles and publications to back up just how much distance I’d put between myself and that tender, pig-tailed girl who’d believed her mother would always be there, her voice a bell calling her home.

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“I want to talk to my mother,” I tell Madelaine, my voice barely a whisper. “Can we do it?”

Madelaine wrinkles his brow. “Have you brought anything?” He asks, referring to the offerings that normally accompany a spiritist misa like the one we’re about to attempt: a photograph of the deceased, her favorite flowers, an object she once touched.

I think of the few things I’ve kept of my mother’s: A turquoise bracelet she’d worn on

her wrist, a wooden spoon she'd held to mix batter for our Christmas cookies and birthday cakes. A note she'd written two months before she died. *Be my valentine in August, Becky. Because I love you always.* I hadn't thought to bring any of it with me.

"It would be easier if we had something that belonged to her," Madelaine tells me, shaking his head. "Something that held her *aché*. But I'll try."

He fumbles through piles of candles and saints. Plucks a slip of paper and pencil from a bowl filled with dried flowers and beads, and asks me to write my mother's name.

"Write it carefully," he says, "so I can read it."

I form the letters slowly, printing neatly so Madelaine won't have to stumble unnecessarily over the strangeness of a foreign name.

"Mimi Meyers Huntman," he reads back to me, his voice tripping over the guttural German sounds. When he finishes, he reaches across his dresser for a goblet and fills it with water. "The medium through which we talk with the dead," he reminds me as he drops the slip of paper into the glass, my mother's name breaking through the line where water meets air and making its way to the bottom of the glass.

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Madelaine turns his attention to the preparations he hopes will entice my mother into the room. He lights a candle inside the upturned bowl of a jicara. Passes a bottle of *agua de colonia* around the circle, each of us dousing our hands and head with the pungent scent he says will protect us from dark spirits that might try to attach themselves to us if we manage the break between worlds.

"Start singing and praying," he tells Zahylis, "as if it were a mass." I expect to hear the Lucumi songs I've grown accustomed to among santeros, but Madelaine and Zahylis fill the room with Catholic hymns, both familiar and strange in their Spanish iterations, Madelaine's voice like water breaking over stone, Zahylis's rising clear and strong above it.

Uncertain of my role in the room, I listen quietly as their voices turn from hymn to hymn. From time to time, Madelaine pauses to fill a cup from the rum bottle he keeps near his feet. "It helps me get over myself," he smiles, passing the cup to me, "so I can make room for El Cimarrón." I take a swig, feel the hard liquor rocketing straight to my gut and head. Still it is hard for me to get over myself. I want so badly for this *misa* to work. I search

my memory for any spiritual practice that might connect me with the traditions at work in the room. I lay my hands on my lap the way I've learned in meditation class, squeeze my eyes shut.

"You're trying too hard," Madelaine chides me. "Whenever foreigners come they think they have to strike some sort of official pose." What he wants is for me to relax. Open my throat and enter the hymns he and Zahylis are weaving through the room. I go through the motions, when I can in Spanish, other times in English, always keeping my voice low enough to escape being heard. How to tell them I'm ashamed for them to hear my voice? Afraid that they, who are able to summon such beauty from inside themselves, will discover that at my core I am tone deaf. Ugly. Deeply flawed.

Madelaine doesn't care about any story I might give him. "We have to hold the energy of this space together," he tells me, "if we're going to get your mother in the room." And so I try. I make up words, push myself to hum along. I feel something like wings beating inside my chest, demanding to be released. But I'm still inside my head, worried more about the quality of the sound I might make than the act of making it. Madelaine drops his head into his hands. "I feel nothing," he tells Zahylis.

I will myself to try harder, tell myself it doesn't matter whether or not I can sing. What matters is that I sing. While I struggle to join in, Zahylis rises from her seat to stand near Madelaine. He leans into her, takes her hand in his. With his free hand, he touches his wife's face, her shoulders. Tenderly. Loosens her salt and pepper hair from its braid, combs his fingers through it until it falls down her back. Leads her into a slow underarm turn, first in one direction, then the other, their voices turning from the hymns they've been singing to a song I've never heard.

*Ay madre, Zahylis begins, oye la voz, oye la voz.*

*Oh mother, hear my voice.*

*Misericordia, Poder Divino, Madelaine breaks in, his gravelly voice braiding a new refrain through hers.*

*Misericordia, madre de Dios...*

*Misericordia para este ser...*

My mind fixes on *miser cordia*, this word that sounds like misery but means mercy as mysterious as everything else about this mass. From the Latin root meaning "pity" and also "heart," it conjures that fine line between pain and spirit, between holding on and letting go. I'd felt it beating in the breasts of the chickens we sacrificed at Daniels', heard it in the cries of Maruchi's goats. It was the thing santeros called *aché*. The spirit my mother carried in her voice.

What would it look like for me to open my throat? Let go of the part of me that feared sounding ugly and raw. Give voice to the sound of that nineteen year-old who'd stood, feral with grief, at the edge of Lake Michigan, her voice bleeding out into the howling wind?

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"It's time to call your mother into the room," Zahylis tells me, motioning for me to stand. "Say her name."

I pause, struggling to locate my mother's name among the jumble of the room.

"Mimi Meyers Huntman," I stutter, my voice still unaccustomed to making sound. And again, more loudly. "Mimi Meyers Huntman."

"Mimi Meyers Huntman," I repeat, my voice gaining strength with each repetition, the cadence of my mother's name forming a base beat for Zahylis' and Madelaine's chorus:

*Ay madre, Oye la voz...*

*Miser cordia, madre de Dios...*

*Mimi*, I join in, the strength of my voice startling me. *Mimi*. Then *Mother*. And then *Mamá*, both the Spanish and the child's name for her.

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I close my eyes. When I open them I feel a change in the room. A stillness rising in the space between us. Not the kind I've seen in movies where an invisible wind comes from nowhere to blow the medium's candle out. But not entirely unlike that either. Madelaine, who is still singing, begins to stutter.

Zahyls nods. “He’s going into trance,” she tells me. “El Cimarrón is taking over.” I see the change in his body, his head bobbing, eyes widening as if he were looking not at but through me. Madelaine, or rather this man who is now both Madelaine and El Cimarrón, takes my hands and lifts me from my seat. He turns me under his arm, dancing me first in one direction, then the other. *Misericordia*, he sings, his cheeks wet with tears, his voice like the tearing of silk. The room filling with something that feels like church. An anointing, like oil rippling through the air.

Zahyls whispers, “The spirit is taking hold.”

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