

Heart of My Heart, Bone of My Bone

You were my first grief. From the death of you, so intimate, so much an unexplained event of the universe, I made my first decision to live.

You have no name. That was before names. There were comets plunging into the sun and cells dividing in a frenzy of life too intense, too bright for anything like thinking, but I remember. There was a great space of floating notes and dim light and growing. There were three hearts beating. One, a deep repetition of thunder that was the weather of the universe, a slow rumbling music. And two hearts pitter-patter, interweaving, fingerlacing, first me then you then me then you, *patta-pun patta-pun patta-pun*.

I reconstruct this story from the outside, from knowing what things were, from having names. On the inside, I grew stronger and you grew weaker. I grew and you grew still. I felt your sadness and fear and loneliness without having to interpret signs, read your expressions. The fluids of our bodies mingled in one chemical response: I knew *exactly* how you felt, and never, since then, have I been so completely known.

It was there from the beginning, the thing that was wrong with you. Something I knew but at first was hardly aware of. That grew to trouble me, until slowly I knew that I would lose you. Would be as naked without you as the pulsing electric cord of your spine was naked, unprotected. It was a failure of some part of your body to develop, a loss in the genetic gamble, a part that was necessary and was not there, did not work. *A part that was necessary and is gone.*

On the outside, I read about fetal development, look at pictures, watch *The Miracle of Life* on TV. I am shivering as I watch: ten days, two weeks, four weeks, seven weeks, twelve weeks, fourteen . . . then nothing. The picture of the sixteen week fetus comes up, on the screen, and I feel I have never seen this shape before, pinpointing your death in the shadowy places of my body's memory, a kind of emotional sonogram.

Cell of my cell, bone of my bone, when your heart fluttered and whispered and was still, when you floated passive in the salty water and slowly came undone, frilling and fraying at the edges, becoming strands of protein, disappearing into the walls, the glowing cord my flesh—the stillness that followed was terrible, *patta-pun and nothing, patta-pun and nothing*.

You were heart of my heart and my own single heart murmurs and mutters now, an extra beat in each movement, *patta-pa-pun, patta-pa-pun*, beating “Are you still here? Are you still here?” Trying to find you in the stillness of the house, too big now without you, my own small heart and the thunder above me.

This is all I know: You were the closest being in the world and then you're gone. I have looked for you everywhere, though for years I had no name for the thing, crying in my child's bunk bed at night for someone I missed, not knowing. Turning over all the stones to find you: If I get sick, too, will you come back? Promise to die young, will you come back? If I promise never to have another close to my heart, will you come back? *Patta-pun* and no answer. *Patta-pun* nothing.

I am a woman rich in brothers. Ricardo, who came when I was two. At my dining he said, “You were my first coconspirator and soulmate.” Partner in all games of my childhood. Sibling to the wild guava bushes, friend of dogs in every ley of Chicago, companion of my homesickness, with whom I learned the meaning of solidarity.

Alejandro, who was born when I was nearly twelve. The golden treasure we brought with us to Chicago, the child of my adolescence, the one I sang to, took mourning climbing, hitchhiked with. The almost-my-son one. The one who reminds me I lived.

I am rich in brothers, rich in love, and still, tiny as my little finger, curled up beside me, is the first seed of myself, wailing to the edges of the empty universe, for brother, my self, my first lost love.

Sandra Cisneros b. 1954

*Read this in the
for context*

Born in Chicago, Sandra Cisneros spent much of her early life moving between various homes in the United States and her father's family home in Mexico City. As a student at the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa in the late 1970s, Cisneros drew upon her bicultural experience to write “the stories that haven't been written to fill a literary void.” Since then, she has made the border state of Texas her home and the bicultural site in which much of her work is located.

The National Endowment for the Arts, the University of Texas, the University of California, and the MacArthur Foundation have acknowledged Cisneros's border aesthetic by awarding her fellowships, grants, and visiting appointments. Yet it is this same successful career trajectory that has generated some controversy among her literary peers. Her first book collection of poetry entitled *Bad Boys*, appeared in 1980 as part of a series of Chic chapbooks. Like most Chicana/Chicana literature, Cisneros's early work was tributed by small presses specializing in Latina/Latino literature. But the interest generated by her first collection of fiction *The House on Mango Street* (1984) enabled Cisneros to break into the world of New York publishers. Her crossover appeal during the late 1980s and early 1990s facilitated a larger movement of Chicana writers whose commercial and critical success generated greater mainstream appreciation of Chicana/Chicano literature as well as some anxiety about their uneven reception. No one can understand recent history of Chicana/Chicano literature without making Cisneros a central figure in that reading

What they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don't. You open your eyes and everything's just like yesterday, only it's today. And you don't feel eleven at all. You feel like you're still ten. And you are—undereath the year that makes you eleven.

Like some days you might say something stupid, and that's the part of you that's still ten. Or maybe some days you might need to sit on your mama's lap because you're scared, and that's the part of you that's five. And maybe one day when you're all grown up maybe you will need to cry like if you're three, and that's okay. That's what I tell Mama when she's sad and needs to cry. Maybe she's feeling three.

Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one. That's how being eleven years old is.

You don't feel eleven. Not right away. It takes a few days, weeks even, sometimes even months before you say Eleven when they ask you. And you don't feel smart eleven, not until you're almost twelve. That's the way it is.

Only today I wish I didn't have only eleven years rattling inside me like pennies in a tin Band-Aid box. Today I wish I was one hundred and two instead of eleven because if I was one hundred and two I'd have known what to say when Mrs. Price put the red sweater on my desk. I would've known how to tell her it wasn't mine instead of just sitting there with that look on my face and nothing coming out of my mouth.

"Whose is this?" Mrs. Price says, and she holds the red sweater up in the air for all the class to see. "Whose? It's been sitting in the coatroom for a month."

"Not mine," says everybody. "Not me."

"It has to belong to somebody," Mrs. Price keeps saying, but nobody can remember. It's an ugly sweater with red plastic buttons and a collar and sleeves all stretched out like you could use it for a jump rope. It's maybe a thousand years old and even if it belonged to me I wouldn't say so.

Maybe because I'm skinny, maybe because she doesn't like me, that stupid Sylvia Saldivar says, "I think it belongs to Rachel." An ugly sweater like that, all raggedy and old, but Mrs. Price believes her. Mrs. Price takes the sweater and puts it right on my desk, but when I open my mouth nothing comes out.

"That's not, I don't, you're not . . . Not mine," I finally say in a little voice that was maybe me when I was four.

"Of course it's yours," Mrs. Price says. "I remember you wearing it once." Because she's older and the teacher, she's right and I'm not.

Not mine, not mine, not mine, but Mrs. Price is already turning to page thirty-two, and math problem number four. I don't know why but all of a sudden I'm feeling sick inside, like the part of me that's three wants to come out of my eyes, only I squeeze them shut tight and bite down on my teeth real hard and try to remember today I am eleven, eleven. Mama is making a cake for me for tonight, and when Papa comes home everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you.

In *Mango Street* Cisneros adapted the experimental form used by a number of other Chicana/o writers: the collection of related stories and sketches. *Mango Street* recalls Tomás Rivera's . . . *y no se lo tragó la tierra/And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (selections from Rivera's novel appear elsewhere in this anthology) inasmuch as it uses a central protagonist to give short prose pieces coherence. About a young girl living in a segregated neighborhood in Chicago during the 1970s, *Mango Street* concludes with the Chicana artist's withdrawal from her community and, in a Joycean gesture, commitment to return. "I have gone away to come back," read *Mango Street*'s closing lines. "For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot get out."

Cisneros's second collection of poetry, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* (1987), also invokes a developmental narrative; only here the narrative is ironic. The "bad girl" of the opening section develops into the "evil woman" of the next two sections, an artist whose escapades include adultery and a sexual romp through Europe. Cisneros's female speakers are complex, as they represent both defiance and fulfillment of cultural expectations. Her terse poetry evokes and ironically venerates the archetypal Chicana/Mexicana evil woman: La Malinche, the Indian mistress of Hernán Cortés, the "whore" who is said to have sold out her people to the conqueror. Like other Chicana feminists, Cisneros attempts to recover and revise La Malinche's tarnished reputation. Her project of mythic reclamation revises Chicana/Chicano cultural archaeology and bears the urgency of remembering everyday women whose lives would otherwise be anathematized or even forgotten.

Cisneros's feminism is even more evident in *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991). The first section contains a series of

sketches told through the juvenile perspective familiar to readers of *Mango Street*. The rest of the book explores in greater detail the "wicked" woman of Cisneros's verse: the sultry seductress, perceived in her own culture as a sellout not just because of her sexuality but also because of her relative assimilation into Anglo-American culture. If *Mango Street* tries to solve the problem of the ethnic intellectual's estrangement from her community through a promise of return, *Woman Hollering Creek* demonstrates that making good on that promise creates another set of problems, negotiations, and anxieties.

In 1994, Cisneros published a book for children, using excerpts from *Mango Street*. *Hairs/Pelitos* illustrates the cultural diversity that takes place even within families by describing the different types of hair among members of Cisneros's own family; the book conveys a portrait of a family living in "heterogeneous harmony." With illustrations by Terry Ybanez, *Hairs/Pelitos* is written, appropriately, in both Spanish and English. Also in 1994, Cisneros published her third book of poetry, *Loose Woman*, in which the much-maligned "wicked woman" brazenly expresses a vision of history, sexuality, and community that celebrates poems that "fart in the bath" as much as it lambasts "politically-correct Marxist-tourists/voyeurs." The poems are to date the best at capturing Cisneros's sense of outrageousness always made funnier, stronger, and deeper when shared with another as in her poem, "Las Girlfriends": "Been to hell and back again/Girl, me too."

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PRIMARY WORKS

Bad Boys, 1980; *The House on Mango Street*, 1984, 1991; *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*, 1987, 1992; *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, 1991; *Hairs/Pelitos*, 1994; *Loose Woman*, 1994; *Caramelo*, 2002.

But when the sick feeling goes away and I open my eyes, the red sweater's still sitting there like a big red mountain. I move the red sweater to the corner of my desk with my ruler. I move my pencil and books and eraser as far from it as possible. I even move my chair a little to the right. Not mine, not mine, not mine.

In my head I'm thinking how long till lunchtime, how long till I can take the red sweater and throw it over the schoolyard fence, or leave it hanging on a parking meter, or bunch it up into a little ball and toss it in the alley. Except when math period ends Mrs. Price says loud and in front of everybody, "Now, Rachel, that's enough," because she sees I've shoved the red sweater to the tippy-tip corner of my desk and it's hanging all over the edge like a waterfall, but I don't care.

"Rachel," Mrs. Price says. She says it like she's getting mad. "You put that sweater on right now and no more nonsense."

"But it's not—"

"Now!" Mrs. Price says.

This is when I wish I wasn't eleven, because all the years inside of me—ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one—are pushing at the back of my eyes when I put one arm through one sleeve of the sweater that smells like cottage cheese, and then the other arm through the other and stand there with my arms apart like if the sweater hurts me and it does, all itchy and full of germs that aren't even mine.

That's when everything I've been holding in since this morning, since when Mrs. Price put the sweater on my desk, finally lets go, and all of a sudden I'm crying in front of everybody. I wish I was invisible but I'm not. I'm eleven and it's my birthday today and I'm crying like I'm three in front of everybody. I put my head down on the desk and bury my face in my stupid clown-sweater arms. My face all hot and spit coming out of my mouth because I can't stop the little animal noises from coming out of me, until there aren't any more tears left in my eyes, and it's just my body shaking like when you have the hiccups, and my whole head hurts like when you drink milk too fast.

But the worst part is right before the bell rings for lunch. That stupid Phyllis Lopez, who is even dumber than Sylvia Saldivar, says she remembers the red sweater, is hers! I take it off right away and give it to her, only Mrs. Price pretends like everything's okay.

Today I'm eleven. There's a cake Mama's making for tonight, and when Papa comes home from work we'll eat it. There'll be candles and presents and everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you, Rachel, only it's too late.

I'm eleven today. I'm eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one, but I wish I was one hundred and two. I wish I was anything but eleven, because I want today to be far away already, far away like a runaway balloon, like a tiny *o* in the sky, so tiny-tiny you have to close your eyes to see it.

1991

Gish Jen b. 1955

Born in Long Island, New York, Gish Jen comes from a family of five children with parents who were educated in Shanghai, China (her mother in educational psychology) and her father in engineering, and who separately emigrated to the United States around World War II. As a pre-med and English major at Harvard University, Jen earned a B.A. in 1977. She then attended Stanford Business School for a year and, from 1981 to 1983, completed an M.F.A. at the University of Iowa. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with her husband, son, and daughter.

Although Jen's works have appeared in various journals and anthologies, including *The Atlantic* and *The Best American Short Stories* 1988, the 1991 novel *Typical American* marks her arrival as a much-acclaimed fiction writer. Calle and Mona, two sisters who appear in several of Jen's short stories, play minor roles in this work. The novel focuses on the girls' father, Ralph Chang, who, in line with the 1950s atmosphere of upward mobility and conformity in America, becomes absorbed with pursuing the American Dream. Jen's next novel, *Mona in the Promised Land*, focuses on Mona Chang, the daughter who converts to Judaism after the family moves to the upscale Jewish neighborhood of "Scarshill" (Jen grew up in Scarsdale, New York). Her collection of eight short stories, *Who's Irish?*, includes new and previously published works such as "The Water Faucet Vision" and "In the American Society."

In an interview, Jen said that the scene in "In the American Society" where Ralph throws the polo shirt into the swimming

pool convinced her to use Ralph protagonist for her first novel. Thematic act, she stated, indicated that was the kind of make-things-happen act she needed. The first part of "American Society" depicts a Chinese migrant's vain attempt to impose traditional practices and attitudes of an old Chinese village lord on his American restaurant employees. Placed in a setting, the second part of the story suggests that this same background compels Ralph to resist being ridiculed. The structures of the two scenes and the evolution of the story offer an analysis of cross-cultural and racial in American society.

In this short story and in her works, Jen displays a seamless, engaging and comic narrative voice. Her irony apparent in disarmingly straight language. Jen's style contrasts markedly with the styles of Amy Tan and N. Hong Kingston, two other contemporary Chinese American writers with whom she is inevitably compared. However, all three are Chinese American, each highly effective artist in her own right should be read and enjoyed for her individual style. Like Kingston and Tan comes out of a specific Asian American historical-cultural experience. She her rightful place in an American literary tradition that is being redefined to include writers from the various cultures that compose American society.

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PRIMARY WORKS

Typical American, 1991; *Mona in the Promised Land*, 1996; *Who's Irish?*, 1999.