

# Excerpts from *Stubborn Heart*

ISABELA CUERVA

## Cleansing

I.

That summer he touched me,  
we moved to a new house.  
Mother sorted through broken toys,  
old clothes, items—  
let me be scourged and  
scoured, cleaned,  
devoured!—all this  
memory  
handed out in little gift bags—  
if I would not die,  
then my childhood  
was to be quartered  
and distributed, afterwards  
forgotten. I had no problem  
letting go.

II.

The day we moved  
Mother gave me a shower  
for the first time in years.

At my breasts, the length  
of my legs,  
she marveled.

## Christmas Song for No One in Particular

Of my living room:  
white walls & cold tiles &  
wicker seats: the Christmas tree,  
forgotten lights: square  
of the ceiling, pin lights  
on each corner, chandelier  
swinging overhead reflected  
on the picture window:  
wooden panels, doorframes—  
one enters and exits  
after the other: just  
outside, the pig sliced  
vertically  
from his neck down  
to his rump—  
my father slices fish  
in the morning:  
some poor man after  
some accident or other  
finds himself on a table—dead  
—and some poor man  
slices him open—  
like my father, fish.  
Let me tell you when  
I am most accessible: It is 2008,  
and my heels click against floorboards  
of a house that would burn down  
the following year, I am wearing  
to keep me warm some-  
thing resembling a painter's  
smock, big white buttons  
resting against jutting-out  
collarbones, cheekbones  
jutting-out when I bump them  
against aunt  
after aunt, the final

being the one who burns  
down with the house  
the next year. I do not remember  
what she wore that year,  
but I remember what her daughter wore  
when she entered my home in '09:  
long blue dress  
that hung off her frame  
so deliciously: *I loved her  
dress*—my final words  
to her: she died  
with the house. We keep  
quiet about these things now.  
The day my aunt & cousin died  
they were found tangled  
beneath rubble—perhaps the collapsed  
roof—remains of floorboards—  
perhaps whatever remained—  
the house  
sliced from its head to its rump—  
they were found  
only to be sliced  
like fish:  
clavicles to pubis  
only to confirm collapsed airways.  
As if the roof  
was not enough. We know  
enough. Let me tell you  
when I am most vulnerable:  
last night—half-empty  
tables, soiled napkins, half-  
empty bottles of wine,  
the waiter  
picking at a hole in his vest,  
ice cubes melting  
in a glass sweating  
onto the tablecloth, forming  
rings & rings—& names

of the dead  
reverberating from the hollows  
of our chests, echoing through  
the blue of air, and what  
I really mean to say:  
we spoke only of people  
who had left us,  
and of aloneness:  
my uncle's sadness a blooming  
bruise on Christmas Eve,  
another scar to join stars:  
three years down but still  
the vice grip of mourning  
will not let him go—how  
he blames the lights!  
We keep them shut now,  
leave the trees  
to sigh in the dark, waiting  
for moonlight to slice through the night  
if only to illuminate them.

## **Triptych**

i.

Curtain of dust  
billowing  
by the open  
window,  
cobwebs blooming  
on a yellow wall;  
cabinet door

creaking, hanging  
by its hinge;  
orchid  
creeping into  
the room, sole  
inhabitant; doorknob in need  
of replacement, bulbs  
flickering on cue,  
symphony  
of light.

ii.

We could not pronounce her dead  
even when she stopped  
breathing. Stubborn heart  
could not see suffering. The lung  
understood. It collapsed  
when it should.

iii.

In a box—  
this woman's clothing:  
Chinese-patterned pantsuit,  
floral dresses,  
pairs of glasses  
unused for years,  
lace veil,  
several pairs of tube socks,  
that violet dress  
we eventually buried her in—  
this woman's  
remains:  
a bracelet, rings.

## Where

“... there is no there there.”  
—Gertrude Stein

How everything

Begins:

A grain unfolds

Into

Everything.



The slightest breeze rends  
A dandelion. Its seeds  
Join the oscillating wind  
Without memory  
Of ever being whole.



How everything

Begins

To look: gas

And gold. How

Everyone begins

To see.



The stars we see at night are dead.



Grandmother releases  
her final breath, joins else  
things, empty space:

From where I am:  
this smattering  
of the discrete—father,  
mother, bed; brother,  
wallpaper; aunt,  
she; caretaker—from where  
I am: father, again, against



Doorframe: this  
smattering, this  
constellation. We are all light—  
Years apart.



The stars we see at night are  
Dead: the stars we see at night



Here is distance. We have  
many words for it. I like to call it  
*else*. The tiniest fraction of space  
is our constellation of electrons  
between palms, or else things,  
here. Distance. Hairline fracture,  
sliver of naked skin: tell me  
you are here. Tell me this distance  
is but else. Tell me the kerchief  
peeking from your clenched fist  
is as blue as I imagine it to be. My eyes  
no longer gauge things as  
well. If I close them you might  
disappear and I will not  
find you, lost  
in empty spaces. Hairline fracture,  
sliver of naked skin: the where  
where you stand an improbable  
floorboard creaking counterpoints  
to the sound of longing.



Or is it—  
What is it called—  
Scientifically, I mean.



Instructional: find the star  
Closest to the tip  
Of the church's cross.  
Its flickering  
Is older than the bruise  
Of memory. What remains



Are scars in the sky,  
Patches of healed  
Violence scabbing over,  
Finding their way  
To sight.



Instructional:

Find the dent  
    In the air  
Where the seed  
    Of a dandelion  
Imprints its memory.



Counterpoints  
to the sound of longing:  
*I cannot hold you now, I can't  
not hold you now.*



The boy in his sandbox  
scoops heaps into his bucket.

A grain unfolds  
into everything.

The seed of a dandelion  
finds its way home.