

Madness, the Grotesque and Female Identity in “Exquisita ama de casa” and “El juego de la demencia” by Krisma Mancía

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ABSTRACT: Krisma Mancía (1980, El Salvador) is one of the most promising members of the postwar generation of young Salvadoran poets. Like Jacinta Escudos, Claudia Hernández and Vanessa Núñez Handal in prose, Krisma Mancía breaks free of the taboos still found within Salvadoran society that have kept women’s issues out of literary discourse longer than in other Latin American countries, and brings them to the forefront in her poetry. In this study, I focus on analyzing the poems “Exquisita ama de casa” and “El juego de la demencia,” both from the collection *La era del llanto* (2004) and showing how difficult it is for the female subjects to break free from patriarchal order and create an independent, strong female identity. Krisma Mancía delves deeply into the contradictions inherent in Salvadoran society to give us a harrowing look at two repressive expectations still placed upon Salvadoran women today: that of the traditional housewife and of the obedient and lady-like daughter. Through grotesque, often surrealistic images, and multiple voices within the poems, Mancía shows us how these societal expectations result in women becoming monstrous, becoming chimeras that can only find freedom in a descent into madness and rage.

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Krisma Mancía (1980, El Salvador) is one of the most promising members of the postwar generation of young Salvadoran poets. In 2003, her first poetry collection, *La era del llanto* (2004), was one of six books chosen for publication by the Salvadoran institution CON-CULTURA and its publishing house, DPI, to represent the best new poetry being produced in El Salvador at that time. Two years later, in 2005, her work received international recognition when her second book, *Viaje al imperio de las ventanas cerradas* (2006) won the First Young Poetry Prize La Garúa in the category of Latin American authors. Her poetry continues to be recognized and has been included in several anthologies of Salvadoran and Nicaraguan poetry, *Trilces trópicos: Poesía emergente en Nicaragua y El Salvador* (2006) and *Cruce de poesía Nicaragua-El Salvador* (2006), and one of Salvadoran poetry, *45 poetas: Antología* (2007).

One of the most striking characteristics of Mancía’s poetry, and the focus of this study, is how she dismantles traditional expectations of female roles using unusual imagery, silence, and multiple poetic voices to give us a raw look into the psyche of contemporary Salvadoran women. Like Jacinta Escudos, Claudia Hernández and Vanessa Núñez Handal in prose, Krisma Mancía breaks free of the taboos still found within Salvadoran society that have kept women’s issues out of literary discourse longer than in other Latin American countries, and brings them to the forefront in her poetry. Influenced by feminist theory and surrealism, in the poems “Exquisita ama de casa” and “El juego de la demencia” she takes on the expression of the female inner self and the fears and contradictions that are part of women’s lives.

This thematic shift within Salvadoran literature has its roots in the work of early to mid-twentieth century women poets. These poets and writers took on the issues of patriarchal oppression, female identity and gender inequality to one degree or another in their poetry. Many also became prominent members of El Salvador’s cultural milieu and set an example for others to follow by working outside the home.¹ The most important of these figures was without a doubt the poet Claudia Lars (1899-1974). Born in 1899 in Armenia, El Salvador as Carmen Margarita Brannon Vega, she took on the pseudonym Claudia Lars when she began to publish her poetry in 1919. While still quite young, she met the Nicaraguan poet Salomón de la Selva, who was a definite influence on her work. She would go on to attend the literary *tertulias* organized by the poet Alberto Guerra Trigueros, where she met some of the influential Salvadoran writers of the day, such as Alberto Masferrer, Serafín Quiteño and Salarrué. Salvadoran critics agree that her lyric poetry places her among the best female poets of her day, considering her worthy of standing side by side with Gabriela Mistral, Juana de Ibarbourou and Alfonsina Storni.² Her work is best-known for its traditional lyricism and its command of poetic forms such as the sonnet, the *lira* and the *romance* (Escobar Galindo 322). However, some of her poems delve into the issues of feminine identity and feminine erotic desire. For example, her poem “Espejo” expresses the anguish of growing older while looking for the young woman she was within a mirror (Escobar Galindo 343). In the poem “Como abeja obstinada” Lars explores the topic of female erotic desire as well as the switching of

gender roles when the female poetic voice takes on the role of the bee, traditionally seen as male, and it is she who decides where to collect the pollen and where to deposit it (Poumier 414). Although Claudia Lars was never explicitly political in her work, she did champion progressive causes throughout her life.

Another important precursor to the postwar poets and writers is the poet Matilde Elena López (1922-2010). A member of the literary movement known as the Generation of '44, she participated in the movement to overthrow the dictator Hernández Martínez and lived in exile until 1957, when she returned to El Salvador. An academic by vocation, she studied at San Carlos University in Guatemala and received her PhD in literature from the Central University of Ecuador. She was a professor of literature at the National University of El Salvador. In her poem "Diálogo con mi nombre," she explores the theme of female identity by creating a dialogue, which in truth is a monologue, between the poetic voice and her name (Escobar Galindo 497-98). In another poem, "Mirándome en tu cuadro," López explores the male gaze and the smothering effect it has on the female subject (Escobar Galindo 499-500).

Mercedes Durand (1933-1999) is another poet whose work explores feminist themes. As a member of the "Committed" Generation, many of her poems combine feminist, social justice and political concerns. There are moments, however, when the feminist theme predominates. This is the case of the poem "Soneto," for example, where the personal anguish expressed by the poetic voice builds with each stanza until it crashes and ends in uneasy silence at the end (Escobar Galindo 599-600). In "El agua" Durand evokes images of Ophelia when she writes of a girl who is floating down a river, as if she were asleep, letting the current take her. She is already dead, however, and the poetic voice describes her bluish hands and ivory face as she floats downstream, and finally disappears underneath the current (Escobar Galindo 599). In "Llanto" Durand abandons the sonnet and makes use of free verse to express the private anguish of the female poetic voice, which spirals to include not only her own loneliness but also her memories of the military opening fire on protesters gathered in downtown San Salvador on January 22, 1980 (Escobar Galindo 603-04). The poem ends with the poetic voice in tears finally succumbing to sleep, but it is an example of how the personal became political in Salvadoran poetry, which later poets will express in explicit call to arms.

The last poet that I consider a forerunner of the postwar feminist themes seen in contemporary Salvadoran literature is Claudia Hérodier (1950). Politically, Hérodier leans to the left, though her poetry is not explicitly political. In her collection *Volcán de mimbre* (1978), Hérodier explores the themes of love as an oppressive force in women's lives. Unlike the other poets mentioned here, Hérodier writes entirely in free verse; not only does this give rhythmic vitality to the poems, it can also be seen as symbolic of poetic language being set free from the strictures of formal poetic structures. In "Poema," Hérodier also probes the theme of female identity, as the poetic voice has lost her identity,

the things that make her unique, and cannot find them (Escobar Galindo 735). She is condemned to asking for them repeatedly, without ever receiving any answers.

The work of these important poets foreshadows the feminist themes that will surge in Salvadoran literature after the end of the Salvadoran Civil War. They provide a bridge between the present and the past and help us see that the two are inextricably connected.

However, what was still missing in El Salvador was a strong feminist movement and a tradition of feminist criticism.³ It would not be until the publication of Claribel Alegría and Darwin J. Flakoll's novel *Cenizas de Izalco* in 1966 that we begin to see a strong position within the literary text against the patriarchal oppression suffered by Salvadoran women. However, there is a caveat. As Laura Barbas-Rhoden has ably shown, feminist issues within this novel and others written during this time period are strongly linked to the revolutionary movements within the region, especially in El Salvador and Nicaragua (18). Although gender oppression is an ever-present theme in *Cenizas de Izalco*, it is subjugated in relation to the revolutionary theme that Alegría and Flakoll fictionalize. In general, it is the denouncing of political oppression and the promotion of a revolutionary movement that matter most in the novels and *testimonios* written in the sixties, seventies and eighties in Central America, not the contradictions inherent in women's lives imposed by a patriarchal system. In the case of El Salvador, it was not until the 1990s and especially once the Peace Accords were signed in 1992, that writers and poets began moving away from making explicit political statements and towards expressing the personal, the psychological, and the contradictions of their lives in their works. This has been especially true of women authors. With the end of the Salvadoran Civil War, feminist issues take center stage within literary texts. This tendency is stronger in prose than in poetry, but it is clear that post-war poets such as Krisma Mancía are also following the same path, as will be seen in the following paragraph.

One of the first Salvadoran writers to deal explicitly with the issue of female sexuality and desire has been Jacinta Escudos, with her novel *El desencanto* (2001), a theme she had begun to explore previously in her collections of short stories, *Cuentos sucios* (1997) and *Contra-corriente* (1993). In addition, another gifted short story writer, Claudia Hernández, focuses on deconstructing female identity, violence and gender-based oppression, among other themes, in her collection *Mediodía de frontera* (2002). Another more recent author is Vanessa Núñez Handal, whose novel *Los locos mueren de viejos* (2008) presents the reader with the corrosive and damaging effects on women of a conventional, patriarchal society. Krisma Mancía treats many of these same themes in her two poetry collections, *La era del llanto* (2004) and *Viaje al imperio de las ventanascerradas* (2006).⁴ In this analysis I focus on the poems "Exquisita ama de casa" and "El juego de la demencia," both from *La era del llanto*. Through the young woman in "El juego de la demencia" whose younger sister goes mad and eats a canary, and the housewife that makes her life bearable by popping pills in "Exquisita ama de casa,"

Mancía creates a harsh indictment of El Salvador's traditional, patriarchal society and the limits that it places on women.

The first poem that I will focus on is "Exquisita ama de casa," where the housewife in question is first seen banging her head against the wall:

Una cabeza hueca se golpea contra la pared,
en la boca caliente de la cacerola chisporrotea el aceite,
los huevos disimulan su obsceno ombligo amarillo.

Antes de cocinar
saca del refrigerador la cuenta de la carne,
la cuenta del gas y de la electricidad
que el infiel derrochó en las camas de las culpables.

Aparta del camino equivocado a las pobres ollas
y despelleja su asqueroso plumaje de grasa.

Rota la yema de los huevos,
procede a poner la cabeza en el horno,
las vísceras en agua tibia, el sueño
en las manos confiables de las pastillas para dormir.

Sintetiza la presencia de las brujas en una fotosíntesis,
en una fotofobia lunar que atraviesa a pie
la tela juiciosa de la Estrella del Sur.

(¡No me grite al oído,
sirena disfrazada de pescado viejo y podrido,
feo fetichismo del antimuseo prehistórico!)

Al guisar
retira la planta del pie.
Brinca con las manos.
Grita:
¡Bizcocho ocho en el pozo
de los deseos!
Derrite candelas coloradas
sobre el abrigo de su marido
y deshace píldoras para gatos
en el vino francés.

Mientras come,
Lee las noticias:
"Marte en el interior de la luna
se gesta verde
y escucha golpes azules detrás de la piel blanca.
Marte enfurecido
se autoaborta en una tarde granizada".

En el inodoro
Marco Polo hace una escala en el intestino grueso.
Itinerante de apendicitis,
se ahoga en una cólera superficial. (49-51)

As we read the poem, the first thing we notice is the ironic contrast between the title of the poem and the grotesque image of the housewife created by Mancía. There is nothing "exquisite" or delicate about this housewife. Although the term *ama de casa* is most often used to describe an upper-middle class woman in Latin America, who usually has a maid to do the housework, it is clear that in this poem the housewife has to be middle class or lower-middle class. There is no mention of servants, and it is the housewife that is doing the cooking.

Another interesting aspect of this poem is how Mancía uses silence to condition the reader's perception of the housewife. The housewife never speaks, she does not have a name, no identity of her own; she is instead described by a poetic voice that reports her actions in the third person. We only see what the poetic voice wants us to see.

The first stanza introduces us to a woman without a thought in her head, but one who is so full of frustration (or is it that she has already gone mad?) that she is banging her head repeatedly against the wall while trying to fry eggs for breakfast. The oil is sputtering and the eggs are overdone; we can see how Mancía has already begun to deconstruct the image of the perfect housewife.⁵ We continue to the second stanza, where the poet reminds us that women, although oppressed by a patriarchal society, can also oppress other women by taking on as their own the expectations of the patriarchy. In this case, the housewife blames her husband's mistresses for the lack of money at home to buy groceries, rather than her husband, who is the one responsible for committing adultery. Thus, we see that a traditional housewife sees other women as competition and as seducers of men, while men are exempt from taking responsibility for their actions, and indeed, are exempt from keeping their wedding vows.

From the third stanza on, the imagery becomes more and more surreal. In the third stanza the poet creates a hybrid image by using a metaphor that compares an inanimate object with an organic one (Chiquillo 228). In this case, the pots are described as having greasy feathers that the housewife must pull, transforming the dirty pots into chickens that need to be cleaned before cooking.

The fourth stanza starts out with a more recognizable image, that of the housewife trying to commit suicide by putting her head in the oven because the eggs are burned.⁶ The image is a cliché that also emphasizes the frivolity of this woman, who wants to commit suicide for such a senseless reason. The ambiguity in line three of this stanza surprises us as we suddenly wonder whose viscera is in the warm water. For a second readers might be confused as they imagine the housewife eviscerating herself and putting her own viscera in warm water, until they realize it must be the tripe that needs

to be prepared for dinner. This image could also be interpreted as being a hallucination, caused by the unresolved tension within the housewife regarding her identity as a woman and the suicide attempt (Kristeva "About..." 156-57). The last image the reader is left with is that of a housewife addicted to painkillers, without which she cannot fall asleep.⁷

The fifth stanza marks a return to unconventional and surrealistic imagery, as the housewife is transformed into a plant-like monster, a chimera that uses photosynthesis to destroy the witches and the phobias that haunt her. In addition to the chimera, there are two other examples of hybrid imagery in this stanza. One is in line two, when a phobia transforms into a person that walks across a web of judgment. The second is in line three, when the Southern Star implicitly becomes a spider that has spun the web of judgment.

There is a sudden break in the poetic voice in stanza six, which up to now has described the housewife's actions with detachment. This changes in this stanza, for all of a sudden the poetic voice drops the third person and switches to the first person, forcefully telling the housewife not to scream in its ear. The poetic voice uses another hybrid image when it brings together the image of a mermaid, which is another chimera but can also be seen as a symbol of youth and self-sacrifice (Golden 16-17). The self-abnegation and devotion to others that the mermaid exemplifies and that the poetic voice values in the housewife remain hidden by her "costume" of an old and rotting fish. The implication here is that the housewife's true nature is that of a mermaid, who as Stephanie Golden explains, "[...] embodies women's tendency to seek salvation through sacrificing the self for another person instead of through self-transformation" (18). The woman in this poem is defined by the comments made by the poetic voice; to the degree that even when she tries to communicate it is impossible for her to manage it even if she screams. The poetic voice refuses to listen and drowns her out with its own forceful comments. The housewife does not meet its expectations, she is grotesque, neither human nor fish, and worst of all, old and self-centered, rather than young, devoted to others and completely self-sacrificing.

The question remains as to who or what is represented by the poetic voice in this poem. My interpretation is that the poetic voice represents traditional, male-dominated Salvadoran society and the gender-based oppression it exerts over women. The poetic voice is a man and in stanza six he loses his temper with the housewife, who is desperately trying to get his attention. By stanza seven however, the poetic voice has composed itself and has returned to its detached observations of the housewife. The woman in this poem has continued on a downward spiral and it appears she is having a mental or emotional breakdown: she jumps with her hands; she yells a nonsensical rhyme and drips red wax onto her husband's coat to get even. Most disturbing of all, she has turned to drugs in order to get through her day, and the stanza ends with her dissolving pills meant for cats in her glass of French wine. This is the second time

in the poem the pills are mentioned and although the type of pill is never specified, it is probably safe to assume they are either sedatives or painkillers, though in the case of the medicine for cats they could also be used to control behavior. This is particularly telling as we move on to the eighth stanza.

The next image that the poetic voice allows us to see (stanza eight) shows the housewife calmly eating and reading the news. However, she may be in a drug-addled haze, so that the headlines she is reading make little sense. The planet Mars, the moon, icy hail, a green landscape, a white body and blue sounds all swirl together and combine to make the headline something surreal. However, the headline could also be a metaphor for the struggle women face in order to become individuals in their own right, while being dominated by a patriarchal society. Symbolically, Mars represents the Roman god of war, though he is also associated with death and fertility, while the moon traditionally is a symbol of female fertility and emotions. In lines three to seven the moon is pregnant, gestating Mars within her. It is possible here that the housewife is describing her own inner pregnancy where she is symbolically gestating her own desire to fight back. The gestation seems to be positive, the green representing the new beginning, the renewal by this "child." However, in spite of this, Mars is enraged when he hears the moon hit by "blue" sounds, perhaps representative of domestic abuse and the bruises that result from physical assault. His rage is such that he makes the moon (the housewife) miscarry, and the promise of renewal, of rebellion, dies before it can be born. Thus, in this example of synesthesia, the blue color of the slaps in contrast with the whiteness of the skin is an image that is also reminiscent of a corpse. It could be how the housewife thinks of herself, as a corpse devoid of any feeling, so oppressed in her marriage that she feels as if she were both dead and alive, consumed by relentless but monotonous and unfulfilling activity (Kristeva "Black..." 388).

The poem ends with a scatological image of the housewife in the bathroom, suffering from indigestion and rage. Though her rage can seem superficial, the equivalent of drowning in a cup of water, it is anything but. This is the true emotion that the housewife cannot express to others, even to herself, and which consumes her completely.

In this poem Krisma Mancía shows us how silence, as a condition traditionally imposed by patriarchal society on women, forces readers to mold their image of the housewife through the observations of a third party, which in this case I interpret as being male. The woman in "Exquisita ama de casa" does make feeble attempts at rebelling (she burns the food, she takes pills, she fantasizes about her male-dominated life imploding, she even attempts to express herself through screams, since coherent speech is denied her), but it is a useless effort. The best she can manage is feeling an impotent rage while she locks herself in the bathroom. We do not know her name, we do not know what she looks like, the only things we know about her are her actions as seen by the poetic voice, and how those actions do not meet its expectations. She is everywoman.

Relegated to a marginal role within society, she is reduced to a place of inferiority, of the childish, the unsayable and the hysteric (Castillo 371). Mancía's housewife is stuck in a pre-feminist mode. The poet shows us the hellish existence of a traditional housewife but she never gives a way to escape it. As readers, we discern the housewife's inner turmoil from the description given by the poetic voice of her actions, but we never hear her voice. Instead, the poet gives us a snapshot of a grotesque reality that is apparently unchangeable. Perhaps because it is unchangeable, the only means of escape this woman has is to sedate herself with medication, descend into madness, or commit suicide.

A preoccupation with the transgression of societal norms and insanity is evident throughout the collection *La era del llanto*. In the case of the poem "El juego de la demencia," the transgression appears as mental illness, and the person who experiences the psychotic break is not the poetic voice, but rather her younger sister:

La locura tiene espejos en los ojos de los demás.

¿Comprendes?

La locura tiene palabras, palabras largas.

Una noche de repente
encuentras a tu hermana con la boca llena de plumas.
De plumas del canario. Del canario de mamá.

Y sabes que los locos no tienen piedad
y sabes que la piedad no tiene locos.
Sin embargo los locos son como los canarios:
cantan en sus jaulas de oro.

Recuerda:
entre la locura y la cordura sólo hay un paso
dividido por rejas.

Los locos te verán de lejos. Te llamarán con los ojos.
Te extenderán las manos y te halarán la camisa.

Recuerda:
Tú sólo vienes a ver.

--¡No llame con voz de miss miss—un remolino
se inquieta--,
ven aquí!,
aconseja la enfermera.
--¡Miss Miss, ven aquí!,
Diez uñas se clavan en tu cara.

¿Quieres estar en la casa de la risa,
en la casa del "yo quiero volver a casa"?

¿Quieres saber cómo se retuercen los locos
cuando llaman a sus espectros?

¿Quieres sentir cómo las venas de tus brazos
se mueven como culebras en celo
y buscan tus ojos para devorarlos?

En el manicomio los suicidas pueden matarse mil veces.
En el manicomio los muertos son las sábanas blancas.
En el manicomio las fantasmas son las batas con jeringas.

Tengo una muñeca vestida de trapos, trapos grises,
trapos grises.

Tengo una muñeca de laaargos cabellos
que llora, que llora por su espejo de doble cara.
Tengo, tengo, tengo, tú no tienes nada.
Tengo cien cuchillos para la semana.

Mi hermana está loca, loca, loca.
Se la ve en un rincón del mani manicomio
peinándose maniáticamente el cabello,
un cabello laaargo frente a su espejo de doble cara.

Mamá se puso a llorar cuando dejó a su canario
en el mani manicomio.

En el manicomio los suicidas pueden matarse mil veces.
En el manicomio los muertos son las sábanas blancas.
En el manicomio las fantasmas son las batas
con jeringas.

Tú sólo venías a verla
y no sabes por qué te quedas. (33-35)

The poem begins with a poetic voice that at first glance seems as detached as the one in "Exquisita ama de casa." However, in the second stanza we realize that instead of using the third person to observe and report, the poetic voice is using the second person "tú" to speak to someone. There is an implicit dialogue here, though it is unclear who is speaking to whom. One possibility is that the older sister is talking to herself, in a dialogue (or monologue) with the two conflicting sides of herself: one that wants to join her sister in the asylum, and one that clings to sanity and is scared of going mad. It is feasible, then, to think of the poetic voice as representing the older sister. However, from time to time the poetic voice does shift its identity within the poem. The poetic voice takes on the role of guide and it is important that its message be understood as well through the other discernible voices found within the poem: that of the nurse, the younger sister, and the insane.

By the third stanza, we realize that madness itself is personified. Madness has words. The poetic voice is referring to the non-

sensical, often rhythmic or rhyming words that the insane often chant, lost in their own world. Using Julia Kristeva's concept of the semiotic as explained by Pam Morris, it is possible to see madness as the ultimate fount of creativity gone awry:

Language that allows maximum opening to the semiotic is termed 'poetic language' by Kristeva and is characterized by rhythmic qualities, a heightening of sound patterning, disruption of syntax and heterogeneity. The examples Kristeva analyses are almost invariably literary texts, and she repeatedly insists that even in its most intense manifestations the semiotic must always retain the ordering presence of the symbolic. Without this control, such language is completely overwhelmed by the force of unconscious drives and becomes psychotic utterance. (145)

Although madness seems to offer the promise of self-expression, it does so at the expense of coherence. Thus, it is not possible to fully reject the symbolic [social] order and remain sane. It is the tension between the semiotic and the symbolic that leads to new language and new forms of self-expression. When this tension is gone, all that is left is madness. This is something the poetic voice is well aware of, for in stanza six it chillingly warns the older sister (or she warns herself) that between madness and sanity there is only a small step, separated by the bars on the windows of the insane asylum.

In stanza four the poetic voice states that the social transgression was committed by the younger sister, who is found by her sibling with her mouth full of feathers. It is a grotesque scene. The younger sister is dehumanized through her own actions to the level of an animal by eating the canary live. We would normally think of a cat or some other animal as eating a canary, but not a child. This stanza is where we also realize that there is a hidden subtext in the poem regarding the mother of these two girls, for the canary that the younger sister eats belongs to her. The separation between the two statements in line four of the stanza emphasizes the dread and the hesitation with which the poetic voice states that the canary belonged to their mother. The younger sister has destroyed one of their mother's prized possessions, and the question that remains is: did she do it because she suffered a psychotic break and knew no better, or did she do it as an act of rebellion against her mother? At this point in the poem, the mother-daughter tension remains unresolved, and as we move to stanza five the poetic voice underscores the younger sister's dehumanization. She is mad, and the insane cannot have pity for anything or anyone, including the hapless canary. However, in lines three and four of stanza five Mancía creates a simile between the songbird and the insane, stating that the insane are canaries that sing in their golden cage. In this manner, we see how the insane are sometimes thought to possess the ability of creative self-expression, and to be happy inside the asylum. They are inside a prison, of course, but it is a gilded one. This idea expressed in the poem is certainly not new; André Breton believed

that the mad, living within their own realities, were more creative and happier than those that were sane (5). More recently, Jana Sawicki has seen madness as a way to fight against the patriarchal order of society, stating that resistance is found in the "[...] voices of the mad, the delinquent, the abnormal, the disempowered. [...] These voices...are the sources of resistance, the creative subjects of history" (Lappas 89-90). Madness is the only logical way of coping with a diseased world, with a society that is itself sick (Porter 209-210).

Jumping forward in the poem, in stanza 15 it becomes clear that the younger sister has not only eaten the canary but is also denoted by the canary.⁸ This happens when the poetic voice states that their mother cried when she left her canary (the younger sister) in the asylum (stanza 15 lines 1-2). Since the younger sister is represented by the canary, by eating her mother's actual songbird she is also "eating" herself. It is a cannibalistic act that destroys the self. It is also a way to escape the mother's control, for the younger sister is by extension also one of her mother's possessions, just like the canary. By symbolically killing herself, the younger sister should be able to forge her own identity, to escape her mother's control. She is unable to do so, however, because what the younger sister has rejected completely is the symbolic, and has opted to return to the semiotic. However, by separating completely from the symbolic, she has descended into insanity, for in a self that is "[d]isengaged from the symbolic modality, the 'revolutionary potential' of the semiotic disposition explodes into non-sense or madness" (Morris 146). The mother figure in the poem is devoid of personality. She appears only through the descriptions of the older daughter, who tells us two things about her: she had a canary in a cage and she cried when she left her younger daughter at the asylum. She seems to be a foil for the daughters to react against rather than a person in her own right. This might be another reason why the younger daughter is unable to truly break away from her mother. Her mother is not actually present; she exists only through the older sister's utterances. The reaction of the poetic voice to this situation is to keep warning the older sister (stanzas seven and eight) that the mad are dangerous and should be avoided, that the insane asylum is filled with horror. Most of all, the poetic voice admonishes her to remember that she is only a visitor to the asylum, though in the end, this turns out to be false. In the end, the poetic voice is just as mentally ill as her sister.

Going back to stanza nine, reality suddenly irrupts into the poem with the voice of the nurse, who tells the older sister not to call her sibling in such a polite way, such a bourgeois way: "— No llame con voz de miss miss —un remolino/se inquieta—". Patients in the asylum are seen as a vaguely threatening whirlwind, and can be heard repeating the words the nurse says to the older sister. The stanza ends with the older sister getting scratched in the face by two hands, but it is not clear who attacks her. Is it the nurse? Is it one of the patients? Or does she scratch herself when she tries to hide her face away from the patients? After all, the po-

etic voice has warned her that madness is reflected back through the eyes, and that the insane will call her to them with their eyes. Once more, we get the sense that the older sister is also in danger of going mad.

The poetic voice as the older sister takes over once more in stanza 10, and taunts herself impatiently with her questions about her desire to see what the asylum is like. It becomes clear that the older sister feels attracted to the insane asylum, to losing herself in madness, at the same time that it repels her. In stanza 11 the older sister as the poetic voice explains to herself that the insane are allowed to express their anxieties and their fears, which in the end turn out to be figments of their imagination, the creation of their mental illness. They are not real. The insane asylum, as grotesque and chaotic as it may be, creates a sense of safety for the older sister.

Moving on to stanzas 12 and 13, here the poetic voice shifts again and becomes that of the younger sister, who is lost in her dementia. In stanza 14, the poetic voice shifts identity again and becomes the older sister's voice ringing out clearly, as she states "Mi hermana está loca, loca, loca" (stanza 14 line 1). The alliteration and the sing-song quality of the older sister's utterances found in stanzas 13 and 14 are signs that the older sister is also insane. The younger sister thus becomes a mirror, which reflects back to the reader the true state of the older sister.

The image of the double-sided mirror found in stanzas 13 and 14 is also important. Though there are different ways of interpreting the image of the double-sided mirror, Gilbert and Gubar explain that "in women's writing the mirror often serves as image of self-division—of a 'desire to both accept the structures of patriarchal society and to reject them'" (Morris 70). Mancía's use of the double-sided mirror points towards a similar function within "El juego de la demencia." The older sister is torn within herself by twin desires: to reject the asylum and all it contains on the one hand, upholding patriarchal order, and on the other to lose herself in the dementia she senses within herself and that keeps trying to erupt, which signifies

freedom. She keeps going back and forth between these desires until at the end she chooses freedom through madness.

The poem ends in stanza 17 with the poetic voice returning to the distant tone used by the "rational" side of the older sister. Speaking to herself, the poetic voice reminds herself that she was only coming to visit her younger sister, yet she stays in the asylum, though she does not understand why. It seems to be an instinctive reaction, and demonstrates how little the older sister understands herself. By staying at the asylum, the older sister is choosing the refuge of madness, but it is not clear how she will gain the self-knowledge necessary to climb out of it and construct a strong identity of her own. The message of the poem is a pessimistic one: only by descending into madness can women be free, yet that freedom may not be enough for them to develop a strong identity of their own. They may instead end up at the asylum permanently, unable to make sense out of the chaos that surrounds them.

In both "Exquisita ama de casa" and "El juego de la demencia" the road to creating an independent, strong female identity is a tortuous if not impossible one. Like her counterparts in prose, Krisma Mancía delves deeply into the contradictions inherent in Salvadoran society to give us a harrowing look at two repressive expectations still placed upon Salvadoran women today: that of the traditional housewife and that of the obedient and lady-like daughter. The pressure to be the perfect housewife leads to a life of unfulfilling dreariness and work, where the only emotion women feel at the end of the day is impotent rage, which must be pushed down and swallow whole because it is not socially acceptable to express it. Likewise, the pressure to be an obedient and lady-like daughter leads women to a psychotic break in order to rebel against societal expectations, underscored by a lack of knowledge about themselves. Through grotesque, often surrealistic images, and multiple voices within the poems, Mancía shows us how these societal expectations result in women becoming monstrous, chimeras that ultimately can only find freedom in a descent into madness and rage.

NOTES

¹ Claudia Lars was named Cultural Attaché to Guatemala in 1948 by the Salvadoran Government, she also directed the literary journal *Cultura*. Matilde Elena López was a professor at the National University of El Salvador and worked for the Ministry of Education. Mercedes Durand was a journalist and taught at the National University of El Salvador between 1960 and 1970. Claudia Hérodier founded the folkloric group Mahucutah and was a founding member of the group Salvadoran Musical Youth, she also works at the University "José Matías Delgado" in El Salvador.

² Luis Gallegos Valdés writes "Su romanticismo de mujer joven caldea esos sentimientos y embellece esas palabras, pero sin desenfrenos de bacante. Como en Alfonsina Storni o en Juana de Ibarbourou" see p. 226. David Escobar Galindo adds that "Claudia Lars está en la primera fila de las grandes creadoras poéticas hispanoamericanas, con Gabriela Mistral, Alfonsina Storni, Juana de Ibarbourou, Sara de Ibáñez y Eunice Odio" see pp. 322. Rafael Lara Martínez agrees, stating that "Se le reconoce su constante labor literaria en un medio adverso, situándose a la par de la chilena Gabriela Mistral y la uruguaya Juana de Ibarbourou" see pp. 55. A more recent critic, Marco Antonio Barraza, explains that "Su obra literaria, puramente lírica, coloca a la poesía femenina salvadoreña junto a la poesía de Gabriela Mistral, Delmira Agustini, Juana de Ibarbourou y Alfonsina Storni see pp. 143.

³ El Salvador's first feminist organization, the Asociación de Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida, known as Las Dignas, was not formed until 1990.

⁴ It is interesting to note that Krisma Mancía and Vanessa Núñez Handal were both members of the literary workshop organized by La Casa del Escritor between 2001 and 2003. This might help explain some of the thematic similarities in their work.

⁵For the housewife in this poem, cooking is not a means to self-discovery, creative expression, or love. Mancía might also be rebelling against the tendency of some Latin American feminist criticism to see cooking as a metaphor for female creative power. The hot oil, the eggs, all seem to evoke Sor Juana, but in order to stand in opposition to her, rather than to agree with her, see Castillo 56.

⁶This might also be an allusion to the way that the poet Sylvia Plath committed suicide, though not one that is sympathetic to Plath.

⁷Throughout the poem, there are clear allusions to Rosario Castellanos' poem "Valium 10". The similarity in theme and some of the actions the housewife undertakes points to a certain amount of influence by Castellanos' poem over the writing of Mancía's "Exquisita ama de casa."

⁸The image of the canary in a cage brings to mind Alfonsina Storni's poem "Hombre pequeño," where the female poetic voice is the canary that demands to be set free from its cage, which represents patriarchal oppression.

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