

Bailando con los ojos

—a short essay on my father and on dancing

By ire'ne lara silva

My father was not a good man, and except for a phone call a few months before he died, I didn't speak to him the last four years of his life. When he died, it was a heavy burden off my soul. I don't know how much happiness my mother found at his side. I do know none of my siblings escaped unscathed, though I think my brother Moises, being dark-skinned and gay and the youngest, received the brunt of it.

But the best of what my father was lived on the dance floor. He knew how to jitterbug and mambo, knew cumbias and polkas and huapangos. I was eight the first time I understood what he could do. The first beats of a huapango started and he was off and running and the irrepressible stamping of his feet lifted every person in that church hall off their feet and on to the floor. He led them all. And the floors and the walls and the roof shook with every beat and it was glorious. The best of what he was, he was when he was dancing, skill and talent married to passion and a complete lack of self-consciousness.

My father didn't teach me how to dance—I don't know if he thought I wouldn't have any aptitude for it or if he thought no one would ever ask me. He often predicted that I'd grow up to be fat and unsuccessful and due to my stubbornness, married to a man who'd beat me.

I learned how to dance from some very friendly Latinos my freshman year in college. Though I never could get salsa quite right, substituting a modified cumbia step. And samba remained elusive even though one of my favorite songs in this life is Sergio Mendes' "Magalenha."

I tore up dance floors from one coast to another from age 18 to 27. Danced barefoot on the earth. Danced in reception halls



ire'ne's parents, Eduarda Lara Silva and Guadalupe V. Silva, Jr.

and house parties and clubs. Danced in taquerias and outside taco shacks. Danced alone and with others. Danced late and early, sober and drunk. After 27, the last time I tore the ligaments in my knee, I poured myself into writing and away from drinking and clubbing. The last great dance I remember was with my friend Erin almost ten years ago—though I spent half that dance remembering how to dance. The last ten years have had more pain and exhaustion than dancing.

The last fifteen years or so of his life, between diabetes and arthritis, my father went from dancing all night to resting longer and longer between dances until it got to the point that he couldn't make it through an entire song. And then, eventually, he couldn't make it to the dance floor at all. But he would say, "Estoy bailando con mis ojos." (I'm dancing with my eyes.) And he would tap his fingers to the beat and watch the dancers dance. And he would remember favorite dances and favorite partners and all the nights he'd ever danced.

Which makes me think of what I'd always thought of as a dicho but is actually a quote from Gabriel García Márquez: Lo bailado nadie te lo quita. (No one can take away what you've danced.) And in this last decade, I've lived in my memories of past dances and often danced with my eyes. Though lately, I think I might almost be strong enough again to hit the floor.

A few years ago, I was surprised by what I wrote during a 3-minute free-write. Something about my father's amputated feet stamping a huapango in their black boots in the afterlife. And how when he died, he went to reclaim them. I don't believe we remain who we were when we die. I think our energy rejoins the universal creative energy. I hope that what was violent and abusive in my father was laid to rest when he died, and that the best of him, the part that danced, flowed back into the universe.

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