



The Night of Exile

by Marjorie Agosín

I draw the night of exile as one starts to write the word “nostalgia.” And that night draws the absence.

I still remember the clarity of that first night, the night before the departure or the flight, or the beginning of another story.

I was 14 years old. I loved my country, its Cordillera that always surrounded me and offered me refuge. It protected me. Only crossing it pained me. I wanted to stay there in my own place, in my room that seemed to welcome the sun at every hour.

That night in my room, I traveled between waking and dream. I stopped before the chair where my school uniform was laid out each day. The white blouse, the white stockings, the blue skirt, and the insignia of my school, The Hebrew Institute.

I imagined the steps of Delfina Nahuenhual, steps that always sounded like autumn leaves rustling, and I heard her say, “Sleepyheads, it’s time to get up and get dressed for school.”



But I was always up before everyone in the house. I loved that immense word *madrugadora*, or “earlybird.” It had so many magical vowels. It was an open word, like all the dawns I used to greet with, “Buenos días, Chile.”

I even remember the morning of the exile. When we heard Delfina’s steps, we got dressed in a hurry. She too wore the look of departure like a ripple on her wheat-colored face.

We left for the airport in a terrified silence and, to my surprise, found all my schoolmates there waiting to say goodbye. At that time, Chile was an innocent country. People always went to airports to say goodbye to those who were leaving or greet those who were returning with a carnation or a rose.

But I knew that we would not return. That this trip was final. Perhaps I would understand what it was to be exiled as my great-grandparents and grandparents and parents had come to understand. I knew that I belonged to a group of nomads, to the diaspora, and that the only thing I would carry on my trip was a basket of Spanish words.

My mother brought a little bag of earth from her homeland, a seed of an avocado that ruled over the garden, and another from an orange that bid us farewell with its intangible fragrance.

The night of the trip was a night full of abysses and questions that gnawed me.

My parents were plunged into the silence of a pain so strange, a pain of those who must leave everything they know, that somewhere else, will have to learn to live again.

I walked through all the rooms of the house. The garden, the house of my grandparents across from mine. My grandfather’s face peering out of the balcony, almost transfixed, barely moving his hands in a sign of goodbye.

Since then, I wanted to recover everything. Like in Borges’ story “Funes the Memorius,” I didn’t want to forget anything. But later I sensed that if I didn’t forget some things, I wouldn’t be able to live. The process of choosing which would be my zones of memory and my zones of oblivion is something that I still do in the mysterious and peculiar zone that is memory.



Exile has been a subject that strangely has inspired writers throughout history, from Dante Alighieri to contemporaries in a myriad of countries and moments. Writing from exile gives me a kind of impression that I am in a nomadic state. In transit, perhaps waiting for a return to something that no longer exists.

Exile has the capacity to affirm the zones of memory in a multitude of forms from the obsessive physical notation of abandoned places, to the ability to recover them in the new space. That's why the philosopher and historian, Pierre Nora always speaks about the spaces of memory that at times, tends to play an elusive role, tinted over by new cultural references where the writer finds herself, like the new aesthetics of the acquired space, like a new geography of landscapes, languages, beings.

Exile is like living in a kind of dislocated imagination where the landscape has also changed. It is no longer the yearned for landscape. But the new landscape also seems to converse with what it no longer is, as if it were always in a dialogue against oblivion.

The Uruguayan poet, Cristina Peri Rossi in her book *State of Exile* says: "Exile is a blind river winding from country to country."

If the dislocated geography is altered, speech is also altered. The accent reveals that one is from somewhere else. It accentuates the feeling of absence, pain, loss.

But the loss is devastating, overwhelming. The loss is losing the world and living in one that is borrowed. I have always felt this, the loss of the essence of one's being to recover another, but have always known that the new one is borrowed, dislocated, decentralized.

Let us imagine that exile, perhaps is like walking toward an unknown frontier. To reach a cliff, an abyss where there is no possible return—only travel among the shadows:

Through the streets
They pursue
Old shadows
Photos of the dead

I stop and reflect on this poem by Peri Rossi because from a young age, I too began to collect photos of my dead family. As if through those faces I could recover an ancestral memory, a sense of permanence, a sense of what I was through the absence of others.



The exiled loses her life in a single instant, a single second. The life is displaced toward coasts, unknown bays where the process of always being from another place, or always living in translation begins.

I stop here to meditate on the subject of language that is at the center of the complexity of exile. How to converse in another language? How to translate the essence, the heart of a poem into another?

When I came to Georgia, I didn't speak English. At first, my father and I dreamed together as we always did. But they were daydreams. He told me, "Margie, we will learn to speak in Georgian". I believed that I was speaking a distant form of Russian, but in reality, I was speaking with a southern accent.

When we left Chile on that long night of the exile, the plane flew low above the lights of Santiago as if it wanted to tell me something, as if it would say, "Look at the lights of your city. They are beautiful constellations that travel with you."

I also felt that I was saying goodbye to my words, my beloved words with which I learned to name the world and, more than anything, to name the stars...

"What will you do with them?
How will you keep them? Where will you bring them?"

My history professor, who wished me farewell with the rest of my class at the airport told me sweetly, "My child, keep your words in a basket of plenty."

But above all, exile, especially for the refugee, is not plenitude but the story of its scarcity, of what no longer exists. But just as this metaphor of abundance always remained for me like a great possibility of living in the plenitude of things and objects, the only plenitude I knew was words.

From the early age of 14, I felt that I had to polish words, caress them, treasure them. In which language should I write them? Should I keep them in a basket of plenty or in a basket of scarcity? How would I make sure that I wouldn't lose them?

The subject of words has remained inside me for a long time. In the first years in Athens, Georgia, I loved to walk to the university library and spend time in the Spanish books section. I didn't necessarily read them, but I liked the simple fact of being there with my beloved books where I found a place of refuge. Sometimes I liked to rest my head full of words on their hard spines, and dreamed that they were ships and lighthouses that would return me to my beloved country.



Preserving the language and not letting myself be influenced by the new one that appeared before me was my first challenge. Even now, thinking of this always returns me to a mix of emotions. Writing in another language seemed to me like writing in a borrowed world, a world that was not completely mine. I think about the poem by Enrique Lihn, "The Dark Room," a poem about the complex experience of adolescence. But I felt that writing in a foreign language was like entering a dark room; and to quote Lihn where, "the air's heaviness in the dark room...threatened to come down from the ceiling."¹

I stop at this experience now that there is a limitless number of extraordinary writers who have written in other languages, and who have been able to capture the essence of being in another space, as in the case of Nabokov, or Conrad and in later times, Joseph Brodsky who tried to write poetry in English.

One of the many dimensions of exile is the creation of what we call the "translingual imagination," from the title of a book edited by Steven G. Kellman in which he explores how writers from all over the world acquire a multitude of languages.

I expound on this to understand that for some writers, a language is the only passage to the world that is left.

For me, the experience of writing in a language, particularly in Spanish sharpened my senses. It made me more deeply explore my own language, its sounds that echoed in the solitude of an empty room.

The imagination of the writer in exile is always profoundly altered by the experience of the language. For some the experience of the loss of familiar places translates into living in another language. For me, it was remaining faithful to my language by always writing in it and embodying it.

To fine-tune the sensibility of a language that one does not hear in daily speech feels like something that is borrowed, acquired, distant and not distant, since the imagination lives with it.

The imagination of the writer in exile searches for landscapes left behind, and finds them to reconstruct them. Often it invents them. But it always returns to them, to the first words, the first instants, the first feeling of the heart of the world in one's hands.

¹ Translation by Jonathan Cohen.



The list of Latin American writers in exile is endless. We have become the new group of nomads, and perhaps our imagination is portable, traveling with us as we travel with it.

When naming some, I think of the outcast Gabriela Mistral, who always spoke of her missing country, her dusk-darkened country, who though for more than thirty years lived outside of it, never stopped writing about it and inventing it. Even when she returned, she only became more celebrated in the zone of death than in life. And Julio Cortázar, who from Paris followed the history of Argentina, became involved in its causes, and was no less in search of a history and a just society than his neighbors from the Rio de la Plata, Mario Benedetti and Cristina Peri Rossi, as well as others in the Caribbean, in Mexico, and on the island of Cuba, like Guillermo Cabrera Infante or Armando Valladares.

Many who stayed also wrote from their countries as if they were absent, like the Chileans, José Donoso or Diamela Eltit who always told us stories about an exiled society, a society truncated and wounded.

Exile in the imagination of a writer is not always leaving a place and existing in another, but remaining in it and leaving existence...

If we think that the imagination of the writer is located in a variety of tributaries, we can imagine the turbulence of the remembrance as a ferocious, swelling sea. We imagine the flow of emotions when recomposing stories to create narratives that are constructed from the immensity of pain.

Perhaps we think about exile as a place without roots, just doors that come and go, providing exits and entrances through uninhabited houses, never reaching a port, never anchoring, without stories, only using memory to reconstruct them.

I always use the space of the sea to talk about the subject of the imagination of the writer in exile, the spaces so deep and ever changing like the surge of the sea. The sea that is also like an abyss, an immense port with no entrance.

In my experience, exile helped me to imagine my country, and the distance taught me that it is the best ally of the exiled. At only 14 years old, I decided always to write in Spanish, as if the language itself gave me roots that would return me to that port for which I yearned. And I feel that the preservation of my language while I lived in the other was essential to my development as an artist. In having preserved the Spanish, I felt that I had preserved a kind of purity. As if I wanted to slowly preserve each of my



emotions. As if I wanted to always be from that left behind, forgotten, constantly reinvented place.

The center of my writing also was not the new country in which I lived, but the country that was toppled by the new one, the country where I left the memory of others, in particular that of my parents, Moises and Frida Agosin who told me the stories of their lives. What I did then was try to understand my personal and historical past, to learn where I came from, and about the emigrations of my parents to later reconstruct my own. I didn't search for a new place, but only to return to mine, to the one I had lost, to the shadows, the residue, to what I left behind, to search for the stray light of the foreigner who must depart.

Reconstructing the history of my parents through two books in Spanish, *Sagrada memoria*, or in English, *A Cross and a Star*, followed by the book dedicated to my father, *Siempre en otra parte*, or *Always from Somewhere Else* allowed me to affirm my own existence. To feel that exile did not become a perpetual wandering from one place to another, from one dream to the next, but an exploration of lost roots with only a desire to retrieve them, a desire to feel them, a desire to recover the usurped.

I have always felt that the writer in exile is a lost being. I have had dreams about the arrival to new cities. I have no maps. I long to find something familiar, a door, a passageway, but I am completely lost. Thinking I know where I am, I become confused.

Thinking I know where my keys are, I discover that my bag is open and everything inside falls out. As if I were submerged in a long river or as if the wind itself were carrying me in a whirlwind of emotions.

Writing is an affirmation for the writer before exile. It helps us to say, "Here I was, here I dreamed, here I lived, these were my places". I sensed that writing about my family, first my parents, later my own memoir only up to 16 years old, and then the return to the memory of my grandparents, immigrants to Chile, was I able to recover my own story, my identity, my essence so that the exile would not imply a loss, but a constant recovery of that loss through memory.

Art, like all types of writing has the enormous ability to investigate, trace, waken consciousness. For me, exile has given me the ability to search not in the country that received me, but in the one that I left. I didn't try to be someone else, or write in English, or change languages. I tried to recover absences, trace the intimacy of vivid moments to explore the memory from a dissolved time to reconstruct it.



I have also had the wonderful opportunity to recover my dead, to visit them through writing that returns to name them, returns to imagine their trajectories, their comings and goings. In this way, I have been conversing with exile from the memory of their recovery, from the imagination to the constant search for the beauty that lives within words always recovered through writing.

Marjorie Agosin is a human rights activist, writer, and literary critic. She has an M.A. from Indiana University, and completed her Ph.D. in literature at Indiana University in 1982. A native of Chile, she went into exile after Pinochet's violent *golpe de estado* in 1973, but has never ceased to fight for the reparation and memory of those who suffered its harshest consequences. Heir to a turbulent and diasporic tradition (of Jewish decent) and to a history of political resistance and survival, she is an indefatigable human rights activist, defender of the rights and priorities of women in Third World countries. Agosin has been awarded the Gabriela Mistral Medal of Honour (for lifetime achievement) by the Chilean government (2002) and the United Nations Association of Greater Boston Leadership Award for Human Rights (1998). She is a clear example of the integration between human rights activism and academic scholarship. Leading advocate of the rights of women in Chile, of their agency in the resistance to the Pinochet dictatorship and of their role in the transition to democracy and the permanence of the memory of the past, she is the leading expert in the Chilean *Arpillerista* movement, as illustrated by her books *Scraps of Life: Chilean Arpilleras. Chilean Women and the Pinochet Dictatorship* (1987) and *Tapestries of Hope Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile* (2007). Professor Agosin is also an award-winning writer and poet, who has published poetry, memoirs, and fiction. Her works include *Brujas y algo más/Witches and Other Things* (1986), *A Cross and a Star: Memoirs of a Jewish Girl in Chile* (1995; about her mother's childhood in Chile during World War II), *Always from Somewhere Else: A Memory of My Chilean Jewish Father* (2000), *The alphabet in my hands, a writing life* (1999); *At the threshold of memory. New and Selected Poems* (2003); *I lived on Butterfly Hill* (2014) She is the author of the acclaimed international literary anthology of women's writing on human rights, *A Map of Hope: Women's Writing on Human Rights: An International Anthology* (1999). In addition to articles concerning women's human rights that have appeared in publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Ms. Magazine*, and the *Barnard Occasional Papers on Women's Issues*, Prof. Agosin has published numerous articles on contemporary Latin American women writers.

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