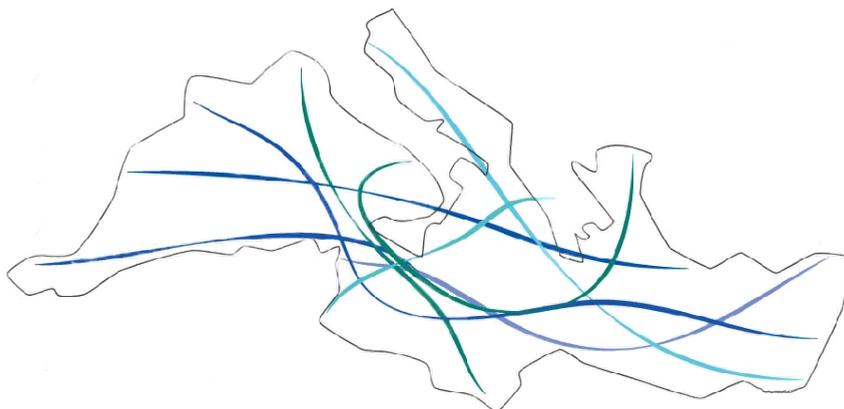


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*Review of Nora Strejlevich,
Un día, allá por el fin del mundo,
Santiago de Chile, LOM, 2019*



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Review of Nora Strejilevich, Un día, allá por el fin del mundo, Santiago de Chile, LOM, 2019

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In her essay *Lugar del testigo. Escritura y memoria* (2019), Strejilevich contends that a witness must not refrain from speaking about what s/he endured because “the most radical exile produced by the detention camps is that of language: the impossibility of talking about the mark imprinted by horror. Consequently, the effort to narrate is fundamental.” In *Un día, allá por el fin del mundo* (One day, where the world ends) the author achieves just that. This novel is an intense narrative about what it means to go into exile, as the place that shelters those who have been dispossessed of their life. From the country that expels and devours its children, the narrator opens with a loving dedication, “To Gerardo, always”. She advances, halts, stumbles, comes and goes. No matter where on the globe she is, the route ends up at the same juncture, intersecting with a precious object: a napkin from some café with a penciled sketch of her brother is reminiscent of the black and white photos family members of the disappeared carry in their marches. Not coincidentally, the final chapter has the same title as the book. Gerardo’s portrait on the napkin was drawn by Graciela Barroca (also disappeared in 1977), his girlfriend.

The author begins and ends the narrative in present tense, retracing her restless and tentative steps from 1977, after her own abduction and reappearance, when it was time for her to leave. Her nomadic wanderings, from city to city, invite us to accompany her. As the narrative moves forward or backwards in time, we gingerly come across her travel journal, returning us to the past even as she transits forth, unable to anchor at any place. How can one inhabit the world after torture, disappearance and death? As philosopher,

writer, voracious reader, and exile, Streljevich always hesitates about going to yet another new place of “refuge”.

As readers, we feel her restless footsteps, “feet pointing in one direction, and my head in another, two poles without a rotation axes” (p. 15). The book consists of six chapters that, with all their comings and goings, lead us to different cities, towns, and neighborhoods: a kind of seesaw in which time moves by recollections, objects and travel diaries evoked in the present. Certain sections are prefaced only by date and place, while others are conceptualized as in chapter titles, as “Los fantasmas vivimos así” (We ghosts live like that) and “Frankenstein.” The only thing in common between each place she finds herself in is an air of strangeness. Remembering is the flip side to temporal continuity. That special place between mourning and latent absence – always paradoxical and dislocated – is woven together with paradigmatic portrayals of the disappeared brother, along with silhouettes, photos, floor tile, marks and imprints on memory. Exile or never remaining in one place is an act of resistance. To survive, one has to “leave” but she resists moving forward without others, without her own kin, her dead. Nora refuses to leave them behind; they go with her wherever she goes. When she delays returning from exile it seems that she wants to delay an approaching death. She keeps wandering because if she stays put in one spot, mourning will be close behind. Yet she does not foresee her father’s suicide: she arrives too late. The only remaining place where she can be with her father and those who are gone is the written word. There are no ghosts on paper: conversations with her mother emerge, alternating with drawings made by her father, humor, and her own maladjustment with reality, that new topography disassociated from her existence. In every successive journey she seeks the one road where she will not encounter loss. And that dimension of life can only be reversed or stopped by writing.

Living in transit through different countries, carrying her notebooks so as not to abandon “that cosmic geography called intimacy”, she holds on tight to a country off the map (p. 14). From Canada, Argentina looks like “an upside-down world/dlrow,” (p. 15). Writing enables her to work through life’s simultaneous daily shifting between death and life. Most of the time she mocks herself,

nervously revealing the absurdity of everything that happened, her forgetfulness, and desire to postpone a decision.

From Israel to Greece, from Greece to England, England to Italy, Italy to Spain, Spain to France, France to Brazil, and from Brazil to Canada. These are places in flux. Her perpetual motion determines destinations as though from an airport she might simply throw magnetic darts, and wherever they fall, she will go next. “Continuity terrifies her as much as the lack of it” (p. 50). Language moves with the velocity of the memories, pushing limits of that emotional geography to which she fully intends to return some day: “vacillating between spaces and times, always tiptoeing so as not to step on a hand, a face, any skin of my collection of silhouettes that shed their pages along the way” (p. 10).

Lingering in any place along her itinerary from Canada to Argentina, in the chapter “Nadie le pregunta a un muerto” (No one asks a dead man), which, she clarifies, “is not the first chapter” (since exile began long before and always begins all over again) is, somehow, the desire to slow down the journey that will inevitably lead to her father, with subsequent stops where the landscape begins to weigh upon her. All of a sudden, she wants to go: the route is asphyxiating her. Along this pilgrimage, she reveals her inner-most thoughts, spilled out onto notebooks that collect the signs of her immediate and most remote dwelling places, thus weaving past and present. She attempts to include all that has happened, fully knowing that will be impossible. It’s as if she has to get lost before arriving. In her drawn-out pilgrimage to see her father, things happen, sometimes difficult things, in Colombia, Bolivia, and Brazil. At last she arrives in Argentina, for the reunion with “Him”, where she witnesses a father that long ago ceased to be León. Nora cannot grasp the distance between him and this man, and barely intuits that his departure is imminent.

To her story Strejilevich incorporates her father’s drawings to recover the beauty of his brushstrokes, what had been León’s delight until his children were snatched away from him. By including these images, she strives to inhabit her exile, because “that’s how ghosts like us live”, without losing memory, making an effort through her notebook-journal writing of her travel-testimony, to conjure in the present the state of mourning that she does not want

to lose. This past-present plot is not restricted to her writing. Strejilevich also participates in demonstrations. On 24 March 1987, on the eleventh anniversary of Argentina's last military coup, she sees a placard bearing the names of her brother and his girlfriend, both disappeared in 1977. She joins the crowd, and holds up the sign. Chance transforms every point on the map into a potential meeting place with her loved ones.

At times our sight dims and we fall with her, the narrator, into the hole made by inevitable steps. At other times, her "edispunwod" world makes us laugh, like the missteps of life that years later no longer make us blush. Strejilevich longs to flee but also longs for the calm she has stored in the living memory of this family, and this society, decimated by state terror.

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