

## WRITING AND ACTIVISM

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### SOCCER, POWER AND WORDS

When I was eight years old, I got my first explicit lesson on sexism and the hidden meanings of words.

My two older brothers -- sixteen and nineteen -- spearheaded a soccer team named after our street: *Ferrari Fútbol Club*. They used to practice right in front of our house, on *Calle Ferrari*, a slab of concrete plastered over a forty-five degree gradient on Bellavista Hill in Valparaíso, the port in central Chile where we were living at the time.

They let me play with them -- as second goalie at the lower end of the block -- ensuring that the ball didn't keep rolling all the way down to *Plaza Victoria* -- and, once in a while, as left winger. "You're much faster than all these guys put together," my brother Jorge would remark, as he briefed me in preparation for the scrimmage. "So, take advantage of your speed and when you see an opening, just shoot!" he'd add, slapping my shoulder with his left hand and pointing to the improvised goal made up of two heaps of sweaters and coats with his right.

I would put my whole heart into my game -- running up and down the hill, dribbling the ball the way my brothers had taught me, and shooting whenever I had a good chance. Quite a bit of the time I did score, which made me proud and my team happy. Clearly, then, I was an integral and valuable member of the Ferrari Football Club.

But it didn't take me long to realize that this assumption was nothing but a naive illusion of mine. When the opportunity to play a "real" game at Osmán Pérez Freire Stadium came up, I was not included on the team's roster.

*Tú eres mujercita*, "You are a little woman," Jorge offered as an explanation.

"Yeah, you're too small," Nelson, the younger of the two continued, realizing how confused and upset I was.

"Then I can play when I get older?" I half-affirmed, half-asked.

My brothers looked at each other, clearly trying to find ways to soften the blow they were about to deliver.

"I'm afraid not," Jorge answered, shaking his head and staring at the ground.

"Women aren't allowed to play soccer -- it's a very rough and difficult game. Only men can play *y tú eres mujer* -- and you are a woman," Nelson concluded, looking at me with pitiful eyes.

I felt a surge of fury take hold of my gut and then rush out towards my hands and feet. I punched my brothers' chests and kicked their shins with all my might. I could hear their "ouches" and feel their hands trying to restrain me. But I couldn't stop. I don't know how long I kept at it. The next thing I knew, I was sitting on the curb, feeling defeated and exhausted. All I wanted to do was cry, but I didn't. I had understood perfectly well

the meanings hidden within the word *mujer*: weak, inept, incompetent, cowardly, spineless, incapable, pitiful, substandard, inferior – and I wanted to prove my brothers wrong, as at that moment they had come to embody all those who believed this to be true.

It took me years to understand the origins and history of sexism and other social injustices. As for the role of language in mirroring and perpetuating such injustices, eventually I was able to comprehend and articulate what my body had known for a long time: language is not only a sophisticated tool for reflection and communication, but also a weapon loaded with power.

## OTHER EARLY INFLUENCES

I was born in 1948 in Valdivia, a city that the Spanish conqueror Pedro de Valdivia founded in 1552 on the banks of a wide, blue river in the south of Chile. Most of my young years were spent there and in Valparaíso, a strong-spirited and colourful port on the central coast.

Both my parents were teachers, but my mother didn't get a chance to exercise her profession outside the home -- she was too busy scraping and waxing floors, dusting, washing clothes by hand, ironing, cooking, knitting and sewing. So, every afternoon she converted our dining room into a classroom and practiced her teaching with us, her children, and with our school and neighbourhood friends. Right after lunch – the main meal of the day – the table was cleared of dishes and out came the books, notebooks, pencils, ink wells, fountain pens and the chalk. Yes, the chalk. In addition to a big table, eight chairs and a side board, our dining room sported an old free-standing blackboard that my mother had bought in a second hand store. In that room, well in advance of entering grade one, I learned how to read and write

Just like the rest of the family, I turned into an avid reader. My father nurtured our enthusiasm by ensuring that every month, right after payday, we all went to the bookstore to get a new supply of reading material. That's how I got hooked on the work of Jules Verne and Monteiro Lobato. These two writers taught me that a book can contain a whole world – people, places and stories that you will come to love as if they were part of your own life.

My mother enjoyed reciting poetry and through her presentations at gatherings with family and friends I was introduced to the writings of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Alfonsina Storni, Gabriela Mistral and Juana de Ibarburú. For the longest time I didn't really understand the content of my mom's recitations, as my energies were focused on the mix of pride and embarrassment that overtook me on such occasions. But, as I grew older, I began to listen to the words behind her histrionic performances and had to conclude that, just as I had suspected all along, female preoccupations did go beyond the domestic domain and included anything and everything, from astronomy and social issues to existentialism and sexuality.

I also started to see my mother in a different light. How come she liked these particular authors? Wasn't she just a plain housewife and mother? Obviously not. I borrowed her books and, as I read Sor Juana, Storni, Mistral and Ibarburú, it became clear to me that those four women had dared to question and defy the *machista* society in which they had lived and had paid dearly for their honesty and courage.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who lived in seventeenth century Mexico City, was forced to get rid of her scientific equipment, library and writings, and ended up sinking into hopelessness and penitence. Before turning forty, she committed to sacrificing her intellectual activity to purely religious duties. Four years later, she died while nursing her Carmelite sisters during a severe cholera epidemic.

In the first half of the 1900's, Alfonsina Storni, Juana de Ibarburú and Gabriela Mistral, from Argentina, Uruguay and Chile respectively, fared much better than Sor Juana. They published profusely, their work was generally well received, and the calibre of Mistral's *oeuvre* was such that she obtained the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1945. But still, they were subjected to derisive criticism by some of their male peers. Furthermore, Storni and Mistral endured isolation and even hostility in their personal lives: the former, because she had a child out of wedlock, and the latter, because she never married.

Our family's social gatherings also offered a venue for my father's engaging and skillful story-telling. From him, I learned about the power of personal narratives; the ever-changing nature of memories; the importance of telling a story "well" – describing places in rich detail; letting your characters speak in their own voices; using humour, no matter how serious the subject matter; creating suspense... But, perhaps most importantly, I also learned that he had grown up in abject poverty, even though his parents had worked incessantly at backbreaking jobs to provide for the family.

My grandfather was a miner and my grandmother, a laundry woman. My dad was the oldest of thirteen children, but only four made it to adulthood. The other nine died as infants or as young children from preventable and curable diseases such as malnutrition, diarrhea and pneumonia. My grandmother passed away of tuberculosis at age thirty-six, as did her two adult daughters at a similar age. My grandfather died of silicosis in his mid forties and my uncle Mario, of unknown causes in his early fifties. My dad made it to seventy three.

But these tragedies did not hit me until much later, as my father always made sure to infuse his stories with adventure and humour, not to mention animated and colourful depictions of his native landscape, the Chilean northern coast. I could picture him vividly as a little boy, perched on a rock with a fishing line, feeling the bite and the pull of a humongous fish; falling in the ocean and swallowing buckets of salt water, but never letting go of the line; painstakingly climbing back on his rock, and finally winning the battle against the monster. At this point, believing that the story had come to an end, everybody would start to clap. But my dad would raise his right hand and arch his eyebrows. He was not finished. Following a suspenseful pause, he would continue: as it turned out, the creature he had pulled out of the sea and hurled over with all his might was not a fish; what now lay squirming on the beach was actually ... a great big octopus! "Ah!" we would react in unison. He would pause again and finally deliver the closing scenes: killing the octopus by smashing its head with a rock, carrying it home wrapped around his shoulders and offering it to his mother who, delighted, had proceeded to cook a big stew that had fed the family for a whole week.

My father's stories were many and they all involved taking chances. In his early years he had been close to drowning several times, had walked for hours carrying loads twice as big as him, had spent the night hidden in rat-infested sewage ducts, and had turned into a pick-pocket and a thief. As the oldest child, he had taken it upon himself to risk his life over and over again so as to ensure that the family had enough food and clean water; that he could bring home a few extra coins and building materials to repair the dilapidated shack in which they lived. In spite of all his efforts, though, most of his siblings had not made it and his parents had also died young. But *he* had lived on, gone to school and become a teacher. Not only that. He had been able to raise a healthy family of his own.

Many years later I would come to understand the subversive nature of my father's life. By all accounts, he should have died with the rest of them: the millions who over the centuries succumbed and continue to succumb to the wretched working and living conditions imposed by the conquerors, the imperialists, the mining companies, the land owners, the money-makers, the exploiters, the oppressors. He was meant to die, but he dared to live – the greatest risk of all.

## TRANSFORMATIVE YEARS

Between 1966 and 1970, I attended the *Pedagógico* – the Faculty of Philosophy and Education of the University of Chile in Santiago. This was the period leading up to the election of Salvador Allende, and the *Pedagógico* bustled with social and political activism. It didn't take me long to become involved in the literacy campaign sponsored by the Students' Federation in the shanty towns of Santiago. That's how I got to learn about and put into practice the philosophy and methodologies developed by educator Paulo Freire, who had been exiled from his native Brazil in 1964 and was now living in Chile.

The appalling poverty and sense of hopelessness that I witnessed in the marginalized communities where I worked led me to realize that Chilean society needed profound transformations. At the same time, the dignity, intelligence and combative spirit of the people in the literacy groups I facilitated confirmed that the only way to achieve those transformations was through the development of a grassroots movement aimed at replacing capitalism and imperialism with a truly equitable society. So, by the time I graduated with a degree in English and obtained a Teaching Certificate, I had already joined millions of other Chileans who, like me, dreamed of and strove for a socialist country.

On September 4, 1970, Salvador Allende became the President of Chile. For the first time in history, a self-declared Marxist and socialist had been democratically elected as head of state. The program of the *Unidad Popular*, the Popular Unity coalition that he led, proposed a peaceful road to socialism, unlike the revolutionary war that took the *Movimiento 26 de Julio* and Fidel Castro to power in Cuba in 1959. Could it be done? Would Allende be capable of keeping a complex coalition of leftist parties together? Would the US government, the multinationals, the Chilean landowners and capitalists, the political right and the military allow Chile to turn socialist?

Allende's election turned every corner of Chile into a breeding ground for social change. The US-owned copper mines were nationalized. A land reform divided the estates of the traditional *latifundistas* and gave land to the impoverished countryside labourers. Factory workers took control of key industries. Shantytown dwellers and squatters built their own houses with the government's help. Reforms to the health and education systems allowed for more accessible services. An expanded literacy campaign resulted in thousands of adults learning to read and write. World and Chilean literature were massively produced by the state-owned publishing house *Quimantú* and sold at bargain prices. Theatre companies, writers' workshops, musical ensembles and artists' groups crafted new forms of popular culture everywhere.

Those who had never owned a thing were taking a stab at controlling their own destiny, while the ones who had always owned everything and held a monopoly on power, began to boycott and sabotage the new initiatives. Attempts to destabilize the country became blatant. The CIA provided expertise and millions of dollars to the government's opponents, including the national daily *El Mercurio* and the transportation industry. The US imposed an economic embargo. Food distributors hoarded staples, creating a shortage and a black market. Landowners and industrialists left the country and took their money with them, leaving banks with insufficient funds. Allende's foes did everything they could to create chaos and force him to resign.

But, paradoxically, support for the Popular Unity grew, as demonstrated by the congressional elections of March, 1973. It became evident, then, that the power mongers would not hesitate to strike with full force so as to turn the clock back and restore the economic and social order that was now under attack by Allende's reforms.

By April, rumours of a military coup were spreading like wildfire. In fact, there was an aborted coup in June. The transportation industry and some professional sectors went on an indefinite strike. The political right

set about making inflammatory demands for military intervention. Allende attempted to appease them by appointing several generals to his cabinet. Industrial and countryside workers supportive of the government called for a state of alert as fascist paramilitary groups started to bomb bridges and power lines, and assault union and community leaders.

As the country became polarized, the Popular Unity coalition also began to show its internal differences. Some called for a strengthening of popular organizations. Others proposed further negotiations with Allende's opponents. A real revolution or a significant abandonment of the government's program appeared to be the two conflicting positions of the left.

In the end, the military coup of September 11, 1973, found the majority of Chileans unprepared and the horror that began that bright, spring morning went beyond anyone's imagination. These historical events changed my life forever. My family and I left Chile in December of 1973 and, after eight months in California, we crossed the border into Canada on August 7, 1974.

## EXILE AND RESISTANCE

During my first years in Canada, all I wanted was to be back in Chile; not the Chile of the dictatorship, but the Chile of my childhood or the bustling Chile of the sixties and early seventies. I wanted to sit on my mom's lap and touch my father's hand. At times, the longing was so intense, that I could literally leave Vancouver and transport myself to a Chilean Sunday afternoon at my parents', just in time for *onces*, tea time. I would help set the table, horse around with the kids, and pour the water into the gaping cups where *Nescafé* awaited.

There were many like me. We were the Chilean exiles, a wounded community that didn't only mourn the deaths of their murdered and disappeared *compañeros* and *compañeras*, but also the loss of their country and dreams of a better world.

We dedicated ourselves to convince the world that it was imperative to help the Resistance Movement in Chile. We were joined by many Canadians in founding committees, organizing *peñas*, forming singing groups, engaging in speaking tours, staging plays, starting radio programs, carrying out hunger strikes, boycotting Chilean goods, publishing newsletters, liaising with unions, political parties, student organizations ...

My involvement and commitment to the Resistance took a new, more direct form when I agreed to help provide logistical support to members who needed to go in and out of Chile. Thus, between 1979 and 1984, I lived in Bolivia and Argentina.

It took me quite a long time to get used to La Paz. When I began to have recurring dreams of waterfalls, aquamarine oceans and gigantic trees, I realized how much I missed greenery and water. La Paz has virtually no vegetation and no bodies of water. At an altitude of thirty five hundred metres, the earth is brown and red; and the air, very dry and very thin.

I cried a lot. I cried when I got back from work because my feet and back hurt after having spent the whole day in high heels and a suit trying very hard to look like a respectable lady. I cried every time I figured I was putting my family at risk. I cried because I was tired. Very tired. Just leading a double life was exhausting enough, not to mention the amount of work that needed to be done after hours.

But I got used to it. I took pride in both, my paid job and my underground work. I made friends. I nearly forgot that there were no trees and water in La Paz. Life acquired a rhythm that felt quasi-normal. But after

three and a half years, it was time to move on and begin a new chapter in San Carlos de Bariloche in southern Argentina.

Bariloche is a beautiful mountain town on Lake Nahuelhuapi, at the foot of the Andes. People there are quite informal, so I could wear comfortable clothes to work and behave much more like myself. I loved having vegetation around me and being able to see the azure waters of the lake every day. Again, I made friends and life continued to flow *almost* as if the family and I had been leading a “normal” life. But, we were not and after one and a half years, it was deemed unsafe for us to stay on.

So, we returned to Vancouver. The political scene in Chile was changing rapidly. In the early eighties, resistance to the dictatorship had grown, but so had the levels of repression. The more radical sectors of the movement had been targeted with particular viciousness and Pinochet’s forces had succeeded in eliminating some of our key leaders. By the mid eighties, the more moderate segments of the opposition began to emerge as the conductors of a broad coalition determined to replace Pinochet’s regime with some kind of democratic government. In a desperate move, Pinochet held a plebiscite in 1988, lost it, and had to call a presidential election. Patricio Aylwin, a Christian Democrat, was elected President of Chile.

## RENEWAL

Between 1985 and 1987 I worked as a literacy instructor at the Native Education Centre. This was a very rich learning experience for me. Every day I discovered something new about the history of this country; about the values, beliefs and traditions of its many aboriginal peoples; about the hideous living conditions on reserves; about residential schools and the long-lasting effects of colonization; about the many faces of racism... But also, I learned about my students’ love of life, sense of humour, persistence, and determination to grow and reach their goals. Above all, though, what I found most rewarding was to witness their ability to think critically, name the issues and challenges they were facing, reflect upon them, discuss them, understand them, make connections, draw conclusions, and articulate the individual and social actions necessary to bring about change.

My job at the Native Education Centre in Vancouver took me back to Santiago where, twenty years earlier, I had helped other groups of adults learn how to read and write. These were people who, just like the Chilean shanty-town dwellers, had been oppressed and marginalized; considered half-witted and ignorant. But there they were, proving to themselves and to the world that their lack of literacy skills had nothing to do with being stupid, but everything to do with the workings of an unjust society.

This initial experience with aboriginal students was followed by many years of work with First Nations communities across the country. Most of these endeavours are documented in my educational publications.

When I wasn’t working at my paid jobs, I was busy with the *Aquelarre Collective*, an organization composed of Latin American and Canadian women. The work was exhausting, but utterly rewarding as every three months we had a very concrete product to make us proud: *Aquelarre Magazine*, a bilingual, feminist and socialist publication, which served as a meeting place and a forum for Latin American women in Canada, Latin America and around the world. In 1997, after nine years of labour, we had to stop production due to funding cuts. But the collective’s legacy of twenty one issues of *Aquelarre* remains in the collections of many libraries, both in print and digital versions.

In the early nineties, I also began to teach prospective literacy instructors in the Adult Literacy Certificate Program of the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University. After ten years, the program was shut down and I had to reinvent myself once again, this time as a Sessional Lecturer in the Latin American

Studies Program of SFU, where I taught Latin American Literature and Cultural Studies off and on until 2010. In 2009, I was also fortunate to be invited to serve as Writer in Residence and Adjunct Professor in the Department of French, Hispanic and Italian Studies of the University of British Columbia.

Teaching Latin American literature and culture was both, a challenging and an exhilarating enterprise. I had to stay abreast of what was happening in the Latin American scene. I had to design sound and interesting curricula. I had to make good use of an opportunity I never thought I would have when I first came to Canada: the opportunity to expose young people to the writers, poets, playwrights, musicians, thinkers, visual artists, dancers, actors and filmmakers who make us Latin Americans proud.

I believe my students appreciated and were inspired by the works we perused together. How *not* to enjoy a Pablo Neruda or an Alfonsina Storni poem, an Alicia Alonso performance in Revolutionary Cuba, an Antonio Carlos Jobim composition, a Cristina Peri Rossi or a Julio Cortázar short story, an Eduardo Galeano vignette, a song in the voice of Mercedes Sosa or Susana Baca, a novel by Gabriel García Márquez?

Along the years I had admired and enjoyed the work of these and myriad other Latin American cultural workers and it gave me great pleasure to share that enjoyment with my students.

## **BILINGUAL WRITING**

Since the mid 1990's I have been a bilingual writer. A good part of the time, I complete my work in Spanish and then re-write it in English. Some of the time, it happens the other way around. But most of the time, I write by travelling between the two languages.

This process has become an integral part of my work as, in many ways, it reflects the content of my writing – my own and my characters' journeys from Chile's volcano-studded south, its mystic Atacama Desert and the jacaranda-lined streets of Santiago to the expansive beauty of the Canadian West Coast and bustling Commercial Drive in Vancouver. Back and forth I go, they go, mapping the everyday lives and emotional terrain of dual geographies.

It took me years to feel comfortable using both, my mother tongue and my adopted tongue. I was afraid of making mistakes in English – still am – but I'm glad I took the risk, as bilingual writing has become a very pleasurable experience for me. I like the challenge. I love feeling the contrasting texture of the words in the two languages, hearing their divergent sounds, comparing meanings and rhythms, finding the terms and constructions that will mirror each other most fittingly.

Bilingual writing can turn into a long and involved endeavour. It entails creation and re-creation, fleshing out what is in the lines and in between the lines – the sounds and the silences. Often times it becomes tedious, but I keep at it. Why? Perhaps, because it's like giving birth to two distinct bodies that share one single soul; and, somehow, this act is symbolic of my own process of becoming bilingual and bicultural; it echoes, over and over again, my hyphenated existence as a Chilean-Canadian.

## **WRITING AND ACTIVISM**

In 1989, the Chilean dictatorship was replaced by a lukewarm democracy. The neoliberal economic system and the 1980 Constitution imposed by Pinochet were left intact and the dictator himself remained as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces and Senator for life. It was a change; after seventeen years,

Chileans had managed to get rid of the dictatorship; of course, this was a welcome change, but not the one I and many others had wanted. The socialist Chile we had fought for so fiercely had eluded us once again.

I turned to my writing. I collected the poetry, journal entries and stories I had written along the years. I started to write again and in the early nineties I decided to take a huge risk: to attempt to publish my work. I was fortunate. In 1992, Women's Press released my first book: *Guerra Prolongada/Protracted War*, a volume of poetry. A few years later, Arsenal Pulp Press put out the collection of short stories *and a body to remember with* and Editorial Los Andes, *De cuerpo entero*, its Spanish counterpart. And, most recently, Women's Press Literary published my novel *Retribution*.

So, at a critical point in my life, I decided to write and publish so as to keep my activist soul alive. I have continued to write because I love it. I love the challenge of transposing and translating the chaotic nature of life and the complex world of ideas and emotions into the linear, orderly world of language; of searching for the most effective ways to tell my stories and give shape to my feelings and thoughts; of crafting alluring narratives and engaging poems. For me, writing is a creative and pleasurable way of continuing my work as an activist; of uncovering, denouncing, resisting, celebrating and hoping.

## SELECTED WRITINGS

I chose two poems, one short story and excerpts from my novel to show the connection between my ideas and my writing.

The poems illustrate moments and states of mind at critical times in my life: "*Idioma original*"/"Original Language" was written shortly after the coup in Chile and "*Sujeta*"/"Subject," during my first year of exile in Vancouver.

The short story "In the Company of Words" exemplifies many of the concepts I present in my introductory essay: writing as a way of preserving our memories; the subtle and overt manifestations of sexism - as in the phrases *Girls' School Number 20* and *Men's School Number 19*, and the tragic result of a bungled abortion; exposing and denouncing such issues; the hidden meanings of words... I also chose it for its content: allusions to the Chilean military coup and to the difficulties of living as an exile in a new country.

My novel *RETRIBUTION* is the story of three generations of women connected not only by their familial ties, but also by the socio-political events that shape their lives. It spans seventy years in the life of the Martínez family and it takes place both, in Chile and Canada. The narrative unfolds as Tania, a thirty-seven-year-old Vancouver artist, struggles to understand the disturbing information contained in a letter she receives from a Chilean judge, and sets out to re-examine the family stories she heard from her mother and grandmother along the years.

The two excerpts I selected from the first chapter of the novel introduce the main characters, the settings, the central conflict, and some of the issues and themes that the book addresses, i.e., art as means of understanding history, and of giving shape to our aspirations and notions of a more equitable world. The excerpt I picked from chapter three narrates one of the characters' experiences as an activist and literacy instructor in the shanty towns of Santiago. This mini-story within the larger story illustrates the direct correlation between language and activism – words as fundamental tools in the struggle for social justice and political change.



From **GUERRA PROLONGADA/PROTRACTED WAR**, a volume of bilingual poetry.  
 Toronto: Women's Press, 1992.

### IDIOMA ORIGINAL

Sollozos de máquina  
 voces  
 afuera  
 en el mundo

Yo mastico un cierto dolor

Entre mis piernas  
 pedazos de carne  
 con uñas mugrientas  
 pujan hacia arriba  
 fantasías antiguas  
 ya paridas  
 ya abortadas

Yo mastico un cierto dolor

Uñas mugrientas  
 negro  
 brillantes  
 rojo

Yo desangro efímeras imágenes  
 estertores en coro

Mi lengua  
 inflada a la n potencia  
 revienta  
 un líquido espeso  
 ahoga el esfuerzo supremo  
 de articular  
 ar-ti-cu-lar  
 un sentido

Lo he olvidado todo

Mi arma está muerta  
 el futuro no existe

### ORIGINAL LANGUAGE

Machine sobbing  
 voices  
 outside  
 in the world

I chew over a certain pain

Old fantasies

already born  
 already aborted  
 strain upwards  
 between my legs  
 like flesh  
 with filthy fingernails

I chew over a certain pain

Filthy nails  
 black  
 shiny nails  
 red

I bleed ephemeral images  
 death rattle in chorus

My tongue  
 swollen to the nth degree  
 bursts  
 a thick fluid  
 drowns the supreme attempt  
 to articulate  
 ar-ti-cu-late  
 a meaning

I have forgotten all

My weapon is dead  
 the future does not exist

## **SUJETA**

he creado un mundo para mí  
 cuatro pilchas viejas  
 unos cuantos libros  
 la mesa  
 música  
 un lugar ocupado por el orden  
 la armonía  
 el juego de colores y texturas  
 y el vino  
 blanco  
 seco  
 moviendo esta mano  
 resentida  
 ante la invasión autorizada de  
 hombre  
 niños  
 trabajo  
 cocina  
 necesarios enemigos  
 de esta parte mía  
 que goza el espacio  
 solitario  
 celular

que me he creado  
 aquí  
 dentro  
 esta noche fuera  
 dentro  
 mío  
 yo

## SUBJECT

I've created a world for myself  
 some old clothes  
 a few books  
 the table  
 music  
 a place occupied by order  
 harmony  
 the play of colours and textures  
 and dry  
 white  
 wine  
 moving this bitter hand  
 before the authorized invasion of  
 man  
 children  
 a job  
 kitchen  
 necessary enemies  
 of this part of me  
 that rejoices in  
 solitary  
 cellular  
 space  
 of my own making  
 here  
 inside  
 this night outside  
 inside of me  
 this I

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From **AND A BODY TO REMEMBER WITH**, a collection of short stories.  
 Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997.

## IN THE COMPANY OF WORDS

Hey Pilar Vallejo, remember when we used to run down Ferrari Street and the boats looked so small down there in the bay and were so goofy, pretending to be nuts, and then we hung around on the corner with our hands in our pockets and whistled *Madam Butterfly* arias after my brother took us to the Victoria to see the movie with Mario Lanza?

And remember School Number 20 on top of Bellavista Hill, those starched, white girls, ruffles and ribbons, shiny shoes and circles of Nugget shoe polish on our ankle socks, girls reciting *Piececitos de niño*, times tables, Arturo Prat's last words: *All aboard, boys*; and you raising your hand, saying, Miss Graciela, I think he was pushed, and Miss Graciela putting you in the corner for being a smartass and me making faces at you, throwing paper airplanes with messages inside?

And remember Mondays, when we were all spotless, even you and me, singing the national anthem at the top of our lungs in the playground of the *Girls' School Number 20*, listening to the boys across the street, the ones from the *Men's School Number 19*, singing the national anthem at the top of their lungs but a little ahead or behind us? It was pandemonium, but finally we all finished together with Sanfuentes Street between us, *o el asilo contra la opresión*, oh shelter from oppression, oh shelter from oppression, oh shelter from oppression, da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-dah, PA-PA-PUM.

If only they'd seen us, Pilar Vallejo, riding the scooter my Aunt Luca gave me, flying downhill, you in front and me in the back, stuck to you like a barnacle, watching the Vargas' house come upon us from under your arm and holding a high C so strong and clear, even Madame Butterfly would have been impressed. And you, swerving in the last fraction of a second, but we kept on flying, nothing to stop us now but the Blessed Virgin, oh my God, why didn't I listen to my mother, eyes closed and everything red, everything red, and you saying, did you see that, silly goose, we won and nothing happened... Yeah, nothing happened, except my broken arm, with no elbow or wrist, dangling from somewhere in between like the head of the kitchen mop, and that imbecile Gloria Bobadilla singing, *I'm telling your mo-om, I'm telling your mo-om*.

Oh, Pilar Vallejo, so many years have passed since that day I asked you about your mother, and you, blushing like a tomato, told me she was dead and that was that, and I wanted to know how did she die, what did she die of, and you said she was dead and that was that and then, insatiably curious and already quite the extortionist, I said that if you didn't tell me, I wouldn't play with you anymore or lend you my dolls, or the scooter, or anything else. But right away I regretted it and I hugged you because now you were crying and whispering, *From the abortion, from the abortion*, and I didn't understand a thing, but I comforted you anyway and made out as if I understood, and cried with you knowing I couldn't ask my mother or anyone because *from the abortion* reeked of secrecy and evil, and if Mama knew, it'd be goodbye to the invitations to Pilar Vallejo for tea and cookies, goodbye to going to the movies with Pilar Vallejo, goodbye to Pilar Vallejo, amen.

So many things have happened since then and sometimes, like now, stuck on the empty streets of this Vancouver suburb, stuck in this autoland, stuck missing Ferrari Street, with the neighbourhood kids playing soccer, hopscotch, and jump rope, stuck missing the Ideal Bakery and their pork buns at four in the afternoon, stuck in this interminable Vancouver lushness, I think about you, Pilar Vallejo, and wonder what's become of your life, if you went to high school, if you got married or lived in sin, if you had kids, if you ever left the hills of Valparaíso to roam like me.

I'm okay – more or less. Just think, Pilar Vallejo, I'm under another sky and another sun, far away from Valparaíso. My parents wait for the mailman in their house in Quilpué and look for my brother, who disappeared the eleventh of September, 1973. In Canada, I'm learning to speak again and trying somehow to make sense out of life here. I'm a janitor in a skyscraper in downtown Vancouver. From the thirty-second floor, I can see the boats in the bay – tiny, like the ones we used to see from Bellavista Hill, almost thirty years ago.

Who knows, one of these years when I come back, maybe we'll run into each other, strolling through Plaza Victoria. We could go see what Ferrari Street looks like now, and afterwards I'd buy you an ice cream at Bogarín's.

By the way, now I know the meaning of the word abortion.

Two excerpts from the first chapter and one excerpt from the third chapter of *RETRIBUTION*, a novel. Toronto, Women's Press Literary: 2011.

## CHAPTER 1

### VANCOUVER, CANADA - MARCH, 2011

#### TANIA

Thirteen days ago, a letter from Chile arrived.

White envelope.

Registered.

Official looking.

Signed by Judge Arturo Leiva.

A bomb concealed in a handful of circuitous sentences.

Judge Leiva writes that he would be extremely thankful if I were to approach the Chilean Consulate in Vancouver to arrange for a sample of my blood to be tested. He explains that a certain Marcelino Romero is on trial for allegedly having performed acts of torture and rape against women political prisoners at the "Londres 38" detention centre in Santiago, following the military coup of September 11, 1973. There is evidence to believe, he continues, that one of those women would have been Señora Sol Martínez. There is further evidence to presume that these unspeakable acts might have resulted in Señora Martínez becoming pregnant with Marcelino Romero's child.

Señora Sol Martínez is my mother.

Judge Leiva needs my DNA to determine whether Marcelino Romero is my father.

Until now, Miguel Rivera has been my father.

Miguel – curly fingers, hair shooting up to the sky, face of a naughty boy — principal violinist of Chile's Symphony. Miguel, one of the country's thousands of "disappeared."

I never met Miguel, but he has always been an integral part of my life. My mother and grandmother made sure that I grew to know him as thoroughly as the palms of my hands. My mom would tell me over and over again the story of how they came together when she was twelve and he, fourteen. My grandmother never tired of describing his humble demeanor and the magic of his violin playing.

But my grandma's accounts went much further back in time, to her life as a young woman in Santiago, when all she wanted was to become an elementary school teacher. She insisted on providing detailed explanations of the Chilean cultural and literary scene in those times and, at the drop of a hat, would begin reciting her favourite verses.

She was so passionate about poetry, that even her term of endearment for me came from one of her most cherished poems. Although my mami had countless names for me – "*mi gatita* – my kitty cat," "*mijita* – my little daughter," "*chiquitita* - little one," "*cosa más linda* - loveliest thing," "darling," "lovie," "precious," "*regalona* - cuddly one." – for my grandma, I was always "my queen". Morning, afternoon and night, rain or shine, whether I had behaved well or misbehaved, I would be my grandma's queen.

-“My queen, go and do your homework right now.”

-“My queen, stop scratching your crotch and sit like a lady.”

-“My queen, you look beautiful in your organdy dress.”

-“My queen, come here so that I can braid your hair.”

- “My queen, how can you go out looking like *that*?”

When Queen Elizabeth appeared on TV, in her ludicrous hats and carting a little purse that up to this day I would like to open and peek at what’s inside, I felt completely and utterly cheated. Why on earth would my grandma ever want to call me “my queen”?

One day I mentioned it to her. She burst out laughing and then explained that she didn’t call me “my queen” because of Queen Elizabeth, but rather because of a Gabriela Mistral poem called “We Would All Be Queens.” In that poem, Mistral talks about her childhood in the Elqui Valley and the friends that she used to play with, imagining that one day they would all have a life of gratification and joy, their dreams and hopes fulfilled forever; that they would all become queens. While brushing my hair, my grandma went on to tell me that when she was a girl, she also had wanted to have a prosperous and happy life, but destiny had decided to play havoc with her dreams.

-“And as if that hadn’t been enough, destiny also decided to mess up with my daughter’s life!” she added.

-“That’s my mami,” I interjected.

-“Yes my queen. That’s your mami,” she confirmed, as she set the brush down and picked up two colourful hair pins in the shape of butterflies from the top of her dresser. She put one between her teeth – the same way she would hold half a dozen pins when she was doing her sewing – carefully placed the other one on the left side of my head, took the second pin out of her mouth, positioned it on the other side, looked approvingly at me in the mirror, and then continued, as she rested her hands on my shoulders:

-“So, when you were born, I decided to do everything in my power to help *you* become a queen; to make sure that you can realize your dreams and be a happy, happy person. That’s why you’re my queen, not because of Queen Elizabeth,” she concluded, as she chuckled and then kissed the top of my head.

-“Now go play!” she commanded, giving me a pat on the butt.

In addition to her recitations and explanations about poetry, my grandmother also offered vivid portraits of the beautiful trees to be found in Santiago’s many parks. Not only that; she also drew and coloured them for me so that I could appreciate the particular shade of lilac of a jacaranda in bloom; the magnificent trunk and red, succulent flowers of a *ceiba*; the vibrant crimsons and golds of *liquidambars* in Autumn. But while I enjoyed her botanical descriptions and her poetry, I was far more interested in hearing about the pleats and cuffs of her chocolate brown school uniform, the cut and length of the home-made percale dresses she wore on Sunday and, most of all, about her engagement and marriage to my grandfather Andrés, a charming young man who, according to her, looked just like Clark Gable, a famous movie actor.

While my grandmother’s memories of her youth intrigued me, the family’s stories during the time they lived in a little house on Esmeralda Street in Valdivia enthralled me to the point of delusion. This was the place where my mom had become a rebellious teenager; where my uncle Andresito had fallen in love with his friend Carloncho; where my grandmother had witnessed her son’s murder at the hands of the military.

As a child, I was immersed so deeply in those stories that I believed that I had been a witness to them all; that I had lived on Esmeralda Street with my grandma, my mom, and the rest of the characters that populated their past.

When I grew old enough to realize that these were nothing but borrowed memories, I felt completely betrayed and, for quite a while, stubbornly insisted that I had indeed attended the Valdivia Youth Orchestra's concerts; laughed at my grandfather's jokes as the family shared tea and apple *kuchen* at the kitchen table; celebrated Chile's third place in the 1962 World Cup at the town square; travelled to Santiago with my grandmother and met her shrewd and fashionable sister Amparo.

But, by the time I reached my teens, I lost interest in my mother's and grandmother's accounts and even resented not being Canadian-Canadian, born here, with a family history that didn't include military coups, concentration camps, resistance movements and relatives who had either been killed or made to disappear.

.....

As for the letter from Judge Arturo Leiva, I've yet to decide whether I'll act on it or not.

The first few days following its delivery, I was both shocked and filled with insatiable curiosity. I carried the letter in my pocket at all times, fingered it, pulled it out, read it, put it back in my pocket once again. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep. All I could do was think about the message enclosed in those oblique, yet clear words: there was a strong chance that Marcelino Romero and not Miguel was my father.

I knew that my mom had been abducted the day of the coup, but I didn't know when she had been taken to "Londres 38," the torture centre where Marcelino Romero operated. I spent hours researching calculators for childbirth due-dates, but basically they all offered the same information: conception and birth are approximately two hundred and sixty-six days apart. That meant that I would've been conceived on September 23. But, all calculators also cautioned that many births happen up to two weeks before or after the estimated due-date. The answers, then, didn't lie there.

I considered confronting my mother. A few times I took the letter out of my pocket and practiced in my mind the wording of the bomb I would drop on her. Once, I made it as far as her bed. But in the end, I decided that she doesn't deserve this bomb, particularly now that she's so close to the end. She lived a life fraught with hardships and has gained the right to die in peace.

My mami's dying of cancer of the bones, the same ailment that took my grandmother in 1998. It's not surprising, given that they shared so many things in life. Now I wonder if they also shared the knowledge that Marcelino Romero and not Miguel may be my biological father.

After the initial shock and curiosity brought on by Judge Leiva's letter, I entered a state of supreme wrath. How could anyone even begin to suggest that a repugnant torturer and rapist might be my father? When I felt as if I was about to explode, I would get in my car and go for long drives on the freeway. There, hidden in the insular protection of my vehicle and tempered by the noise of the traffic, I'd scream and scream until I had no voice left.

Now, I have arrived at a place of exhaustion and exasperating indecision. I don't know what I'll do about Judge Leiva's request. One minute I believe that I will not be able to go on living until I know the truth, but the next I convince myself that Miguel and only Miguel is my father. A few days ago I went as far as picking up the phone and dialing the Chilean Consulate's number, only to hang up before anybody could answer the call.

Until I muster the courage to make a decision, I will rely on my art to help me pull through these disturbing times.

Yesterday I began working on an exhibition based on my family's history. Every surface of my studio is covered with the sketches, drawings and paintings I have produced along the years. I have also been going through my notebooks and our photo albums; gathering the various objects that my grandma and mom brought with them to Canada; my mother's tapestries, my grandmother's pottery pieces and watercolours.

But, as I sit here, surrounded by a disarray of memories, keepsakes, images and words, I wonder if I will ever be able to do justice to the stories that took my family through its many journeys. I don't know if I'll manage to convey the ordinary yet unique ups and downs of my mami's and grandma's daily existence before the Pinochet coup. If I'll have the courage to portray the horror that followed. If I'll dare trace and bring out the underlying forces that shaped my mother's and grandmothers' lives.

Most daunting of all though, is the unavoidable challenge of having to delve deep inside myself. If I really want to understand my family's history, I will have to do my best to understand myself as well. After all, a good part of who I am is a result of that history and conversely, a good part of that history was shaped by my passage through this world.

Art will be my compass, my lens, my tool.

Art as memory.

Art as healing.

Art as creation and beauty.

Art as truth.

### CHAPTER 3:

CHILE, MARCH 1, 1967 – SEPTEMBER 10, 1973

SOL

In March of 1967 I began to study Social Work at the University of Chile. Miguel had moved to Santiago two years earlier, as he had been awarded a full scholarship to pursue his violin studies. We were euphoric. After an eternity of communicating by mail and seeing each other only during the holidays, we would be living in the same town again, this time in the capital city of the country.

On my first day of classes, we had agreed to meet for lunch. I was running late, so I bolted into the cafeteria trying to figure out how I would find Miguel in the midst of the hustle and bustle of that hub of student activity. I was met by absolute silence and stillness instead. Everybody had turned into statues — dozens of spoons were suspended halfway between bowls and mouths, while all eyes were fixed on one single point: a tall, long-haired boy wearing John Lennon glasses. It was Raúl, President of the Student Federation, standing on top of a table.

I was drawn immediately to his convincing and calm words, the clear ring of his voice, not at all strident, but still full of emotion. Much of what he said that day I had already heard from Miguel, Miss Blanca, Gloria, my brother, my father: we lived in an unjust world, where the rich exploited the poor, where many people starved to death while others indulged in luxury; we were part of a society in dire need of change. Also, the images of Miguel's home and family were still imprinted in my mind. Certainly, these were issues I knew about, but Raúl's speech brought them into focus for me. He was a natural leader: clear, humble, patient, disciplined, and with a vocabulary that could persuade even tables and chairs.

After he finished his speech and jumped off the table, Raúl was surrounded by students wanting to talk to him. I waited patiently and finally made my way to the front of the small crowd.

“I want to do something,” I said. “What can I do?” I asked him.

He smiled and invited me to go talk to him at the Student Union's office that afternoon. That's how, encouraged by Raúl, I got to *La Esperanza*, a shanty town in the south end of Santiago.

I had never seen such poverty in my whole life: shacks made of tin and cardboard, where an entire family spent the night huddled together on the dirt floor, covered with a few sheets of newspaper;



thirty year old women as wrinkled as raisins and with no teeth in their mouths; men made of skin and bones, their eyes popping with the anger and shame they carried inside for not being able to provide for their families; a dirty pot filled with dirty water on top of a feeble bonfire, going by the name of “soup”; children with bellies like barrels and legs like pins; children splashing around in the stench of an open sewer; children dying, the way the children of the poor die, with no fuss, no melodrama, simply dying in their mothers’ arms.

There I met Señora Guillermina. Her youngest baby, “Blondie,” the blue-eyed one, the one that looked so much like her aunt Filomena and had won her daddy’s heart, Manuelita was her actual name, had died just a little while ago. She had also been her older brothers’ pride — they had loved to take her around the neighbourhood inside a wooden box that the gentleman from *La Tranquera* grocery store had given them and to which they had added a set of wheels they had found in the dump. But the baby girl had decided to become an angel just before turning seven months and, most likely, she was now flying around, who knows where, dressed as a butterfly or disguised as a cicada while she sang songs to the sun.

Señora Guillermina, her old man, Don Arnulfo, and their five children had come to Santiago from Potrero Chico Grande, inland from Curicó. They had come to the capital city looking for a better life — they had been migrant countryside workers and had grown tired of the constant comings and goings and the instability of that kind of life. Besides, some friends had told them that for sure in Santiago Don Arnulfo would find a job in construction and Señora Guillermina could work as a laundry woman. Also, the kids could finally start going to school. But, it was already three months since they had arrived and nothing had turned up. If it hadn’t been for the neighbours, who had helped them to set up the shack, the children who panhandled on the main street and came back with a few coins, plus the good-hearted ladies who shared their tea and bread with them, Señora Guillermina wouldn’t have known what to do. Even her own milk had dried up and now that she thought about it, perhaps her baby had died because the only thing she had been giving her in the last few weeks was warm tea, quite weak, but with a little bit of burned sugar to take away the bitter taste.

Señora Guillermina’s grief streamed down her face when she talked about her baby, or when she whispered in my ear that her children went to bed hungry every night and her old man had walked all day but hadn’t been able to get one bit of work. Her cheeks would be flooded with tears, but she didn’t make any noise at all. It was as if at that moment her voice had left her body and joined the world of the dead.

For the longest time I didn’t know what to do, other than contribute to the situation with the noisy evidence of my own anxiety. Whatever I was learning in the Department of Social Work, if anything at all, I’d forget completely when I went to *La Esperanza* and all I could think of was to show up with a dozen *hayuyas*, a piece of *chanco* cheese, a few slices of ham, a bag of pinto beans, some potatoes, a couple of onions. At the beginning I would spend the bit of money my mom sent me for the bus and other minor expenses; a few weeks later I began to dig into my food allowance until finally, I had to stop because by May fifteenth I had nearly exhausted my monthly stipend.

That evening I decided to go to the cafeteria before taking the bus back home to my grandma’s and aunt Amparo’s place. I was looking for Miguel, but above all, I was looking for an answer to my dilemma. I felt completely powerless in the face of what I witnessed during my visits to *La Esperanza* and I couldn’t get Señora Guillermina and her family off my mind. Everything seemed completely absurd compared to that crude reality. What was the sense in enjoying one of Bach’s fugues, understanding the psycho-social experiments of Wilhelm Reich, Karl Marx’s analysis of the capitalist system or Simon de Beauvoir’s feminist proposals if at the same time there were so many people starving to death?

Raúl and Miguel were having a coffee and right away they knew that something was wrong. Miguel comforted me with hugs and kisses, while Raúl guided me with his words:

- “Sol, it doesn’t make sense to go hungry yourself so that you can play tricks with the stomachs of Señora Guillermina’s children once in a while,” he said, while taking my hand. “First, you have to take care of yourself, okay? Your own health is important. Second, you’re not solving anything. That situation is the result of years and years of injustices,” he added.

-“But what can I do, then!?” I cried out in desperations.

-“Why don’t you become involved in the literacy campaign – that would be a good contribution, something that could lead to many other changes...” he offered.

-“Yeah... But I wouldn’t know where to start, what to do” I responded hesitantly.

-“Sol, you won’t be doing it alone – the Federation is already holding workshops in many shanty towns around Santiago. I’ll let the people in charge know that you are interested and they’ll help you set the program up in *La Esperanza*,” he concluded, as he got up and put his coat on.

-“Okay... Sure...” I replied, wondering how it would all work, questioning in my mind the importance of learning how to read and write when you didn’t have enough food to eat, a place to live, a job... But I decided to give it a shot.

Pastor, an arts and literature student, was in charge of the literacy campaign in the South end of Santiago. The following week, he took me on the back of his motorcycle to *La Esperanza*. This time, I was empty-handed and, on our way there, I explained my discomfort to Pastor. In response, when we arrived at Señora Guillermina’s shack, my new friend took paper and pencil crayons out of his bag and produced a series of pictures for the kids: toothless cows with a daisy behind their ears, traveling ants wearing wide-brimmed hats while they carried leather suitcases in their tiny hands, zigzagging polka-dotted caterpillars with lumpy shoes on their feet. The children couldn’t stop laughing and then had great fun drawing their own creations with Pastor’s materials.

Señora Guillermina and Don Arnulfo told us that neither one had ever gone to school, but along the way she had learned to read a few things here and there, and Don Arnulfo was good with numbers, though not at all with letters. When we explained about the literacy campaign promoted by the Student Federation in shanty towns around Santiago, they took an immediate interest. The kids were sent out to pass the word around and a while later we were a group of more than twenty people sitting on pieces of cardboard and newspaper around a bonfire.

At the beginning, you could only hear the crackling of the fire and the children’s giggles. Then, Señora Guillermina began to tell the odyssey of the family’s journey to Santiago, their hope for a better life, the tragedy of their baby Manuelita, the desperation of not having work, food, or a decent house to live in. Everybody nodded, their hands extended towards the fire, their mouths closed tight, their eyes, downcast. But, little by little, other stories, other preoccupations began to emerge and rise over the filigree of smoke, first in whispers, then like a chorus of common understandings and coincidences. From that circle of voices, we got the first word that would serve as a starting point for our educational work: *casa* – “house.”

On Saturday mornings, Pastor and I would arrive in *La Esperanza* at around ten o’clock. During the winter months, we used Señora Guillermina’s place as our meeting place, but as soon as the weather improved, we held our learning circles outdoors. The kids would help us to pitch a few poles and we’d build an improvised awning with a couple of old sheets I brought from home. There we’d settle and would start to read and talk with whoever wanted to take part.

Pastor made a compilation of Latin American and Spanish poetry and one afternoon, at the Federation of Students’ office, I spent a few hours cutting the stencils and mimeographing fifteen copies of the booklet we named “Word Masons.” That’s how, for the first time in their lives, the dwellers of *La Esperanza* had the opportunity to read or hear the words of Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Neruda, Alfonsina Storni, Federico García Lorca, Antonio Machado and Juana de Ibarburú.

A few weeks later, some of the participants began to bring their own poems. With downcast eyes they’d hand us a shaky sheet of paper and ask us to read it to the group. The words buzzed between the columns of dust, while everybody widened their eyes and half-opened their mouths as if yearning to be nourished by those words, caravans of bandy-legged little spiders, carriers of so many emotions. Several

years later, when the Allende government created the Quimantú Publishing House, some of those poems made it into an anthology of popular poetry with an introduction by Pablo Neruda.

#### CONCLUSION:

I came to understand the connection between language and activism many years ago through my work in adult literacy and also through my readings. From Paulo Freire and the Popular Education movement I learned that language is not a neutral tool for communication, but rather a loaded weapon; that the oppressors have used it since time immemorial to keep large sectors of the population subdued and to explain and justify their actions; that the oppressed can and do use it as a tool for liberation: to name the world, reflect upon it, narrate their stories, give shape to their memories, express their ideas, and articulate the actions *they* can take so as to build a more equitable society.

All over the planet and along the centuries, the oppressors have done everything in their power to stop the voices of those who expose their opprobrious practices and put forth divergent views. They have monopolized the media and used it to conceal or distort the facts, misinform the public, and outright lie. They have used overt and covert censorship. When these kinds of methods have not been sufficient – like during the Chilean dictatorship – they haven't hesitated to resort to unmitigated repression: imprisonment, torture and murder, not to mention the burning of thousands of books in public places.

However, the voices of dissent have never stopped. The oppressed and – to echo Paulo Freire's words -- those of us who have suffered and fought at their side, have always managed to assert our views, tell our stories, sing our victories and lament our losses. Everywhere and at all times, we have used our words to protest, remember, bear witness, denounce, provoke and propose.

For me, writing and activism, then, go hand in hand. To write is to use the tool, the weapon called language in pursuit of justice; so that horror can turn into beauty, shame into dignity, and deceit into truth.

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