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## Living in English, Writing in Spanish: The Poetry of Absence

Marjorie Agosín

Emma Romeu

Clara Eugenia Ronderos

**Abstract:** In this study, three Latin American creators living in the U.S. share their reflections on writing in Spanish but living in English. Three diverse voices and personalities from three different national backgrounds (Chilean, Colombian, and Cuban) describe their respective—and diverging—personal and professional experiences to help us understand what it means to “write from a place of absence” stemming from distance from their mother tongue and motherlands.

**Keywords:** absence, poetry, Spanish, English, borders, immigration

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<sup>1</sup> Editors’ note: This is an English translation, offered by the Observatorio, of the Spanish original submitted by the author. See study 064-10/2020SP.

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## Introduction

In January 2020, Dr. Marta Mateo Martínez-Bartolomé, Executive Director of the Observatory of the Instituto Cervantes in Cambridge, MA, proposed bringing together three Spanish-speaking poets living in the United States for a Thursday-afternoon “Conversation in the Observatorio,” where we would discuss writing poetry in Spanish while living our lives in English, and share our reflections and our work with the public. Ultimately, the idea came to fruition with participation from three Latin American women of three different nationalities, and with three different artistic trajectories. The first, Marjorie Agosín, a Chilean poet with a long and illustrious career, who also works as a professor at Wellesley College, gladly accepted the invitation and suggested we focus on the topic of “writing from absence.” Shortly thereafter, Cuban poet and Berklee College of Music and Emerson College Professor Emma Romeu Riaño signed onto the idea; Emma writes poetry with tremendous beauty and precision, though she only came to poetry after excelling as a geographer, journalist, and children’s author. I, Clara Eugenia Ronderos, was also part of the group: I am a Colombian poet, short-story writer, and academic, and a retired Lesley University professor.

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On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, this trio of divergent voices and personalities spent the evening discussing and reading poetry with an enthusiastic public. Given the event’s success, the idea arose to compile and expand on our presentations on that night’s theme—*Living in English, Writing in Spanish: The Poetry of Absence*—for the *Observatorio Studies* series. Here, each of us shares our personal relationship with poetry and examines how the rupture created by leaving our home countries has affected our writing.

For Marjorie Agosín, her homeland, her family, and most of all Chile’s sea and mountains form an image whose presence is revived in her poetry, and which provides sustenance for her work. A reflection on the social injustices our countries of origin face comes to the fore in this image of a country for which she’s never stopped yearning. Agosín also explores her difficult relationship with English and her love of Spanish, her preferred language for writing literary texts. She tells us, “Being from another place, being an outsider, being a foreigner is a feeling that eats away at the soul even after you think you have overcome it.”

For Cuban poet Emma Romeu Riaño, absence is a lifelong companion. She discusses the numerous displacements she experienced after leaving her country, during what she calls her “Caribbean origins,” and describes her experiences in Europe, Mexico, and the United States. Her account magically recreates the Mexican world that she considers just as much her own as Cuba. She also touches on her childhood, the books that nourished her love for the Spanish language, and the things she left behind in her first homeland. With regard to her work, she explains: “My ship flies under the flag of the Spanish language, my voice is nothing but the crew, an enthusiastic passenger.”

My own essay focuses on how every chapter of my life in English has played a critical role in the poetry I write. I also talk about poetry as a vocation into which I have poured each of these experiences, and about my undying bond with Colombia. I also recognize that this hasn’t been easy: “uprooting myself from my past—taking everything that had been important or close to me and excluding it from my everyday experience—was like breaking myself into tiny pieces only to put myself back together in a shape I still don’t fully understand.”

For the three of us, poetry is an ally, a constant companion that has given us the strength to live between borders, to negotiate worlds and languages. It is also clear that, for the three of us, New England winters and the unfamiliar pace of its seasons are a common theme. Seeing the snow fall is something lovely and unusual for us, and has become a symbol of our own estrangement. Our creative process is the product of these ruptures, and that creative process has reached many who, like us, have lived in absence. We dedicate our lives to working with the Spanish language, from the classroom where we teach and share it, to the blank paper where we use it to bear witness to our lives. This is the material that makes up these texts, which we now share with you.

We would like to express our gratitude to Dr. Marta Mateo Martínez-Bartolomé for inviting us to participate in this publication and for her active and, above all, creative promotion of the Spanish language in the United States.

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**Clara Eugenia Ronderos**



## Written from a Distance

Marjorie Agosín

Wellesley College

I write from a distance, from a place of absence, sitting down as I observe the remoteness of a landscape I still haven't assimilated, wondering which is our truly place, wondering which really belongs to us, and to where the roots of this path lead back. For now, I walk the streets of New England, the streets of a city close to Boston, a place that, despite it all, I have learned, over the years, to love.

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In New England, the seasons feel like they're branded on the calendar pages, on the clocks that insist on a constant, recurring orderliness. I write from a place where everything has its proper time; this is hard for me to internalize because, where I come from, chance, lateness, the hour poorly spent, all symbolize a different kind of beauty. In this place, everything runs on time; in fact, it's frowned upon to cancel commitments, and there is a certain sanctity in adherence to a schedule. Despite all my years here, I still love spontaneity, the chance encounters and all the intangible things; the days spent disregarding the time on your watch and the pages in your agenda.

In my country, time is measured with nostalgia and a bit of fatalism, and from my window I return to the nostalgia of rainfalls past, the color of seasons shifting in a natural harmony. In this place, where I write, the snow possesses a silence that asks no questions and demands no response, this snow that accompanies the passing of my days, one after another, from beyond my window. The copious, powdery snowfall and frost present me with a harsher landscape, a landscape that is not my own and

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that, sometimes, makes me wonder whether I am from this country or from that other place that lives only in my memory. As I watch the snow, I wonder about that place I left so many years ago, when I was still a child, when everything seemed to be a rose petal or a hen that laid golden eggs circling a flower-covered patio, like in the Coloanne story my parents read to me once. Still, sometimes, I wonder if I could live in a country where this snow doesn't fall, this snow that makes me write about uncertainty and absence, about the endless contradictions of the spirit.

It never snows in Santiago de Chile and even less on the coast. The snow only blankets the immense, magnificent Andes, the mountain range that defines our natural character and at the same time shuts us in like a sprawling stone wall that is difficult to overcome, even after you have left it behind. From that far-off country, hedged in by mountains and the intractable Pacific, I write poems on absence, I write on a desk that travels through geographies as different as those in my own memory. I write, always, looking sidelong at that outstretched, narrow country called Chile, flying above the permanent geography of my infancy. The harshness of New England winters always brings me back to memories of the Andes, and the gray of the Atlantic transports me, in turn, to the radiant blue of my Pacific Ocean; the curt English *hellos* remind me of the dramatic, drawn-out *adioses* so common among the people of my country. Their prolonged goodbyes still haven't ended in my memory. And every time I reflect on all that, it fuels my terrible conviction that perhaps I will never write in English, perhaps I can only do it in Spanish, my beacon, my refuge.

Through writing, I rearm my familiar past and the fragmented experience of a history that, in Chile, seems to erupt time and again. A history that repeats itself, a history that talks about records on civic equality and that, through its endless chapters, reveals a society polarized by profound inequality between rich and poor. I am troubled by this permanent, repeating history, this circuit we seem doomed to walk. Something in me, too, is fragmenting and polarizing, something in me is also

taking sides; something in me is overcoming this circuit and, then, going back to the beginning again, and again. And in my desire to understand what is happening, I approach writing with the thought that in it, perhaps, I will discover an out; but no, I only find myself, again, and the years that have passed since the day I left that country forever. In writing, I also find the absence that comes from inhabiting a foreign language, the fracturing of the soul that makes me feel, imagine, sometimes even dream in a language that is not my own. Always from the outside, always from the margin, always tethered to the memory of a place to which I cannot return. What is it, this absence? Is it a constant presence? Is this yearning a form of condemnation? I wonder, sometimes, if I'm getting lost in my quotidian present and if the country of my childhood is being watered down until eventually, I will forget it completely.

I write about absence as a gesture that returns, as a thought that brings familiarity with things. I write, for example, about sunsets, or about the haze in which things dissolve, in which they even disappear, that mist that dilutes even the words of my childhood. I write about the mystery and impossibility of holding onto the memory and beloved landscape in each one of my words. In that instant, everything becomes an evocation, transforms into a fugitive memory, and then I write; I write about a place on the map that is my memory, where Chile is my voice, my speech, and the geography of all my affections; I write about the nostalgia that is the wellspring of all my creativity.

In the seventies, when I arrived in the southern United States, the Spanish-speaking population was small and, back then, I spent long days waiting for letters, for my relatives to call my mother on the phone—news from our distant country. I surprised myself sometimes, talking about Chile with the walls or with my parents, who were also in a state of constant nostalgia, though they pretended they weren't so as not to exacerbate my sadness. In the U.S., I felt lonely; my classmates kept their distance and sometimes they were expressly cruel, but I don't blame them; they were

teenagers like me, and they didn't know what loneliness and that permanent state of desertion meant. Being from another place, being an outsider, being a foreigner is a feeling that eats away at the soul even after you think you have overcome it. Sometimes a small word, a quick look at some photographs, the name of a cousin spoken at the dinner table, will conjure long periods of sadness for me.

At first, it was hard for me to adapt my way of thinking to that other language that I would only come to master years later. My classmates spoke English with a very strong southern accent, and they used words I didn't know, since in Chile, our instructor had taught us English with a British accent. In any case, over the years I learned their language, which also contains beautiful sounds, strange words that express deep emotions, and brief grammatical forms that encode complex thoughts. In short, I slowly learned to get to know my peers and their ways of viewing the world in that other tongue.

One day, years later, I decided that my poetry ought to be translated into English—after all, I had spent so much of my life in this country. I was thinking through the possibility of using my writing to combine these two languages, so different and so similar in my subjective experience. And so, as I worked with my translators (who later become my good friends), the presence of English in my life and the beauty of its sounds took an even stronger hold within me. But still, I never renounced the idea of being a Chilean writer living in the U.S.; Spanish, for me, was the alphabet with which I had written my identity. My mother tongue was the home where I laid down my head and dreamed easily. The home that was always waiting for me, the home that was my shelter, the place where I found my past.

I think my insistence on Spanish helped me to center myself on what I needed to do on a daily basis. I took this language, the writers who were with me on lonely afternoons, the letters that I read over and over again, and the childhood memories

that I still keep today, and I used them to build a fortress where I would remain for long periods of time. That was the space where my inner world survived, and it was there that I grew up and grew stronger, until I could fully integrate the customs of those people who later became my friends and, after that, my family. Then came responsibilities, studies, work in which, of course, I had to write in English. But for me, those texts always had a more practical purpose. I still thought the rest—everything related to my inner world—in Spanish.

I considered writing in English to be a kind of sub-writing, a transit of ideas condemned to the order of memoranda and shopping lists: a useful language for bureaucratic correspondence, but insufficient for the flights of my spirit. I reserved the Spanish language for those areas where memories transformed into the familiar scenes I still carry with me today. For me, it would be impossible to use English to describe those places I always visit in my writing; the family we left behind in emigration, the emotional anguish of departure, the idealized landscape of our childhood. For me, Spanish was a wild harbor where the wind blew over colorful rooftops and the birds played in the waves. Spanish, for me, was both a memory and a sort of refuge.

With the passage of time and countless seasons, snowfalls, and springs, I have met many incredible people who I would never have met in Chile, and yet, I still think the same thought: Spanish is connected to my soul, to my deepest and most complex emotions. In a way, the reality of living outside my mother tongue, so far from my country, has helped me draw closer to the language that taught me to think, the language that taught me to name the world. The geography of absence sharpened my senses, it enabled me to return to the first imagination, to the image of that girl being shown the world and allowed to discover it, that young woman who would abruptly feel desertion, who would one day find herself alone in a far-off country, where they ate different things than those on her family's dinner table, a country where they didn't greet you with a kiss on the cheek, a country where the rain

didn't fall with the sweetness of childhood. And in that inner growth, I realized that imagination would be my great companion, that I had to remember what my days and nights were like in the country I had left behind, because without memory, I wouldn't survive.

Poetry became my safe haven in a sense; I could always turn to it and, at night, when the language they speak on these streets filtered through the window, I would take a book of Chilean poetry between my hands and find shelter in its verses. Then, I wouldn't feel alone, so alone, because the poetry spoke not of absence, but of presence. Between those pages, I would fly to remote places where I could see my aunts and uncles and cousins, places where I could hold them in my arms, places where at long last I could lay my head and feel I'd found a safe place to rest. I felt close to everything that related to Spanish, and every day, I would turn to literature so I could be with my language, with the inner geography and with the external form of those words that I loved so dearly. And so, for a long time I lived with that duality, and I think that, perhaps, after so many years, I finally managed to become a part of these two countries, these two cultures, these two distinct ways of experiencing life, always with the sensation of living on an island that exists between two oceans, always trying to remain afloat. An island that, at all costs, wants to preserve a history built on transit and absence, an island that, despite its loneliness, is in touch with the ocean I hold so dear: the Pacific, the sparkling, blue Pacific, beyond the gray Atlantic about which I will write other poetry. One day.

## A Cuban Writer in Massachusetts

Emma Romeu

Professor, journalist, writer

Absence. I've gotten used to the word, learned to coexist with it. There we are, "my absence" and me, riding the subway, heading someplace in the North American city where I live. It comes with me to work; it withdraws when I say hello to acquaintances so they don't notice that I feel out of place; it's gotten used to the concessions I make in order to be understood. The battle with my Caribbean origins and the bond I have with those same origins are part of my everyday life. Ah, the Caribbean! So exuberant, so addicted to touching, so different from what this new space where I live has to offer.

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Absence from my island has been a constant visitor in my life. How could I ever be alone with this permanent memory of loss? Often, another visitor stops by: ineffable poetry. Or perhaps poetry is the host, and absence and I are the guests? Poetry helped me to face the perpetual strangeness that made distance from my homeland so difficult, and to face the obligatory challenges that come with not knowing the language or the culture of a society I found understandable. Perhaps of absence's many gifts, the greatest has been affording me the space-time that poetry requires in order to shine through.

My link to the Spanish began, of course, when I learned it as my mother tongue—or rather, when I learned Spanish in its Cuban modality, with all those oral idiosyncrasies that are rarely reflected in the written language. Very early on, in my school in Havana, I learned José Martí's *La edad de oro*, published a century earlier,

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in 1889; one of this work’s delightful hallmarks is its use of language similar to that used by Latin American children. But in general, the other readings I had access to as a child were by Spanish authors; either that, or they had been translated from other languages; or, they were the encyclopedic merging of translations and original texts—I’m referring specifically to the twenty volumes of *El Tesoro de la juventud*, perhaps the only luxury we had in my house in the seventies. I’ll just say parenthetically that the *Tesoro*, that Spanish language work—edited with the advice of such Latin American personalities as the Cuban Ismael Clark y Mascaró—seems to have first been published around 1915 by a press in Boston, where I now live. In that era, the press, C. H. Simonds Company, also printed a popular collection in English: the books of Herman Melville, including *Moby Dick*.

My childhood spent reading, which enriched my vocabulary and my spirit, is now a fundamental part of “my absence.” The reading I did in later chapters of my life, and the long trips and long stays in other Spanish-speaking countries, led me to a greater understanding of the origins and dynamism of the language with which I expressed my intellect, and undoubtedly taught me a greater appreciation for the language itself. Here in Boston, whether I’m sitting in a café in Cambridge or downtown in one of this city’s impressive libraries, or in my house or somewhere else entirely, the Spanish that I read, draw, and type acts as a magic carpet that immediately rescues me from the site of any disaster.

I admit that I don’t like living in places where they don’t speak my language. But you end up where you end up for the widest possible spectrum of reasons, and I have immigrated to various countries and cities ever since leaving my country. German-speaking Switzerland was no bed of roses for me, who had previously only learned how to survive under socialism in Cuba; then, in Mexico, I confirmed the chasm that exists between living in a language you don’t speak fluently and living in your own; and, years later, the United States again gave me a feeling of

dispossession similar to what I had felt in Switzerland. The difference being that, in this most recent phase, I had learned to make absence an ally, and through that alliance we were better prepared to make the most of this new place. The U.S. is a source of great curiosity for me: its diverse landscape, its flora and fauna, even just the vastness of the country itself all captivate me; and I treasure being able to see the Mississippi River and other places I'd come to know through literature—these are among my favorite moments in my life's current chapter.

Perhaps I ought to mention that before coming to this country, I worked as a full-time journalist. Now I only work infrequently in that capacity, but I'm fortunate that my sporadic assignments arise in the two languages that are now part of my reality. I have no doubt that the invaluable bridge of translation brings me closer to my current setting. It makes me especially happy in this country when some of my children's books are translated, or when they are distributed to Spanish-language reading programs in school, or when my writings in Spanish are included in textbooks.

In Cuba, for several years, my writing for kids was published by a children's magazine that is used by teachers; it had a monthly circulation of around two hundred thousand. The editor was acclaimed Galician writer Xosé Neira Vilas, who was extremely demanding in terms of edits; that training in synthesis and clarity in my writing for children, as well as the sessions I had with the incredible Cuban editor Rigoberto Monzón Llambía, marked my passage from the sciences to the professional world of letters. When I emigrated, I had to start all over, looking for publications where I could place my work for children and adult readers. And little by little, they started appearing in a variety of publications. Finally, my first children's book appeared in Spain, and then in Mexico and the U.S. The fact that my work reaches students in an English-speaking country, with a growing Spanish-speaking population—and the fact that I'm here to witness it—is a delight that makes the nostalgia that much easier to bear.

Mexico and me. Every creator who has ever lived in that country knows just how lucky they are. Mexico brought out the best in my imagination with every one of its old stones, its nature, its colors: the purple seashells of Oaxaca, the pink flamingos, the red cochineal, the yellow cempaxúchitl, and the white that escaped the *alcatraces* and fled to Diego Rivera's brushstrokes, or perhaps vice-versa. My eyes weren't enough to admire the ancestral embroidery worn by the peoples across the country; my sense of smell wasn't enough to appreciate the native delights, like those wafting from the vanilla plant; my astonishment was not enough to register the seventy indigenous languages that exist alongside Spanish. I identified so strongly with Mexico that when I arrived in the U.S. and someone asked if I missed my home, I responded honestly: "I don't miss Cuba, I miss Mexico." But when I began writing poetry in Massachusetts, it was Cuba that first emerged: the island that had been surgically removed from me. Cuba and "my absence" arise in my poetic writing with an insistence on its own precedence over other geographies. Even if I had mastered artistic expression in English, I would never have been able to use a language other than my own to express all the loss and impotence that my exile has left in me.

Another recurring theme for me is nature, which has been the focus of my journalism and which mixes with my own life in a way that sometimes only I understand. I don't doubt that my first emotional connections with the U.S. came through the natural world. I learned devotion to nature as a child from the people around me, I cultivated it over the course of many years in the Cuban archipelago, and I shared it with love: thus, it is an accomplice of "my absence," which is proof of its obstinate wholesomeness. At any latitude, under any circumstances, whenever I am surrounded by nature, everything fits. In Massachusetts, even the Canadian geese that abound here can make me wonder about where I will finally land. At the end of the day, as I see it, in the creative search, you have to travel time and space in a ship that appreciates your inner self. My ship flies under the flag of the Spanish language, my voice is nothing but the crew, an enthusiastic passenger.

Another challenge of living in an English-speaking environment is the moment when I have to write a document, a message, or some other kind of non-literary text in its language. In those instances, I summarize what I want to say so that it's as condensed as possible, in order to minimize the frustration of not being able to keep up good style for very long. This is a skill that has also served me well as a journalist. And I won't even mention how difficult it is in English to use my sense of humor, which is ubiquitous in my Spanish-language writing and in my Spanish-language life. A knowing wink of solidarity with your conversation partner—or your own smile at yourself when you're alone and writing in a language you learned as an adult—help to disarm the stress caused by living in a place that, like it or not, has made you feel isolated. It wasn't until I had been living in Massachusetts for a decade that English words began to occasionally strike me as I was having a creative moment; they would dance about in my mind as I reached for the right word in Spanish. Words from other places I have lived also now reside within me; for example, whenever I'm fixated on a star, in my head, I hear the word *Ek'*, as the Maya on the Yucatan Peninsula say; or, if a wild pigeon lands on my patio and I caress it, in my mind, I call it *mukuy*.

The poems of my childhood—always by the sea, always devouring books—and my family history come up time and again in my writing. Thus, one text is dedicated to a great grandfather whom I never met, who emigrated from Cantabria to Cuba when he was twelve years old and never saw his mother again. My ancestor crossed the Atlantic in order to reach the Cuban archipelago and gift me the astonishment that is the Antilles. The sea has been a constant in my life. I dreamed of becoming an oceanographer, and that was the focus of my studies and work for several years; I swam and scuba-dived since I was very young, and now I feel the absence of the warm Caribbean. This marine essence has left me addicted, in all my interests, to the infinitude of the sea. In my literature and poetry, sometimes the sea is a co-protagonist, or sometimes simply a setting, but I always dive deep into every theme that seduces me.

But I am in New England. Cold water, deep blue, continental coast. This is all magnificent, and I have to call myself to order, more than at any other time, when terrible winter arrives, and I must remind myself that this is the same Massachusetts where Herman Melville lived, and when he penned the final period in his novel *Moby Dick*, he was not sitting by the sea—as he would have you think—but rather, sitting by his window inside, just like me. I share these reflections with “my absence” as I watch the snow fall on the dark hair of any other emigrant. Whether it is because of thoughts like this, or simply because when I’m writing I’m doing my favorite thing in the world, no setting has ever stopped me to the point that I could not let myself carry on, every day, with my ideas: not even a glacier would be cold enough to cool my thrill at a new text.

# Absence: A Space for Creation

Clara Eugenia Ronderos

Writer and independent scholar

What does it mean to write far away from oneself? How has living in an English-speaking world for more than twenty years affected me as a poet who thinks and writes in Spanish? I want to use this text to explore what writing has meant for me during these periods of estrangement from my mother tongue. I am interested in how the process by which this voice—born in a far-off Colombian town and subjected to spatial and linguistic shifts until it became the voice with which I now identify—was formed. Which currents pushed and pulled me, and which have nearly drowned me in a silence of accumulated distress? Which winds have dragged my poor native language across the ground, taking the person who inhabits that language along with it? Which winds have elevated this language and allow it to fly?

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For me, to write is to fold oneself in two, to become another who absents herself in order to create the character speaking in the poem. Perhaps this is why it was easier to allow myself to write and become dedicated to my craft when I came to this country. Here, the absence became clear and initially it made it possible to write in a void, in a silence. English was all around and had no effect on my words. This enabled me to delve into my history, down to the origins of my voice. The first book I wrote during the years following my arrival had little or nothing to do with physical absence. I was here, in the middle of an English-speaking bubble, and what drove me was the need to write poetry about my personal exile, the distance between the desire to write and the real possibility of facing my fears so I could launch myself into poetry. Those forces were in conflict, but they bore fruit all the same. Those first

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poems brought me to my childhood, an abandoned reality that was nevertheless always active in my memory and in my dreams. Once again, I saw that little girl who was constantly writing about everything she encountered, who found that everything she read resonated with her. Her voice prompted me to resurrect her. The first poems in *Raíz del Silencio* evoke those early years of fascination with language. The collection of poems, then, is like an incantation that reanimates that little girl so she can grow up over the course of the book, and become, in the last few poems, an adult poet who accepts herself as such. The almost triumphant voice Appearing at the end of the collection, portrays my early attempts to fly.

In those first years after I came to the United States, there were comings and goings to Colombia, but I was still just a student studying abroad. They were two worlds that still hadn't separated from one another. My life in Amherst was a parenthesis in the middle of my life in Bogotá: a space to read, study, think, and write, far away from the commotion of everyday Spanish.

I enjoyed discovering poetry in Spanish from the very beginning, marveling at the discoveries awaiting me at every bend in its river of words. For the first time, I read *romances* and *jarchas*, the perfectly balanced sonnets of Garcilaso, Boscán, and Herrera. I learned about the torturous path Góngora and Calderón de la Barca took, and how it echoed across the other side of the Atlantic. The complicated, marvelous poetry of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz—"Primer Sueño" propelled my dreams of continuing to write, and her sonnets raised questions that, as a woman poet, grew urgent.

While on this path, I returned to my first teachers, the *modernistas*. And behind the monumental figure of Darío, I learned more about other poets and their multiple American voices, which spoke to me during my solitary hours in the library perusing copies of *Azúl* from Mexico or *Gris* from Colombia, and many other journals

and books from that era. I fell in love, too, with the *vanguardias*, with their playful discoveries and their scandalous metaphors, and with the writers who followed them in those first leaps into the void, reached solid ground, and have been teaching us ever since. Among them, my old friends: Neruda, Vallejo, Borges, and later, many voices from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Spain urged me to continue in my work and fed my love for words, for this language I had inherited, which, in “our” America—I was understanding better and better—had become something new. Everything I read in that era was unfolding before my astonished eyes, and these torrents of Spanish consumed my days.

It was only when I decided to stay and live in the United States that the geographic, linguistic, family, and emotional absences came to the fore. I was no longer just living in a multi-consciousness as a teacher, mother, academic, and poet. No, I was living the here and the there: Spanish and English became ever-present realities. That was how poetry became a field in which to understand, or at least acknowledge, this new break within myself, which has since only become more radical and more complex, as it also entails all other unfoldings of myself.

One key factor in this voluntary exile was my marriage. My married life was a way of bringing the noise of English into the house; it no longer surrounded me, opening spaces and creating a vacuum; on the contrary, it was dragging me with the force of everyday necessity. *Good morning* was the first thing I said when I awoke, not *buenos días*.

This was a difficult chapter. Uprooting myself from my past—taking everything that had been important or close to me and excluding it from my everyday experience—was like breaking myself into tiny pieces only to put myself back together in a shape I still don’t fully understand. The poems I wrote during this period had a lot to do with absence, with estrangement stemming from the unfamiliar changes in the seasons, which either impressed or depressed me, and which marked time in a way

that until then had not affected me because I considered them a fleeting thing. I learned to listen to the weather forecast so I would not freeze to death every time I looked out the window, saw that it was sunny, and nonchalantly left the house in a light blouse on a cold and windy day that surpassed anything I could ever have imagined as little girl from my *tierra caliente*.

When it came time to write my dissertation, I decided to do it in English, with the dream of publishing it, and of distancing myself from the platitudes of critical language that I read in Spanish and which I found so exhausting. I soon realized that the task of mastering another language was really about not letting it become your own master, given the prestige and authority associated with English and its gatekeepers. This was frustrating, terrifying. Only poetry, the act of making it a game, could help me reflect on a situation that seemed impossible. This was the origin of the poem “Lengua extranjera,” which is included at the end of this study.

Thus, the decision to transition from student to immigrant played a key role in the poems that became my book *Estaciones en Exilio*. So was our decision to move from Amherst, where my life mostly took place in a huge, warm Spanish department, to Cambridge, where at first everything seemed cold and hostile, and only a few friendly hands could pull me out of my isolation. During those years, Spanish poetry was the only thing keeping me sane.

To help myself get through those decisions that alienated me more and more from who I was, I built a new life by crossing bridges. The short lengths of time between the cleanly cut slices of university semesters allowed me to almost continue being Colombian in the summers, and for a month during Christmas. In Colombia, in a house in the country, the mountains that have been my companion for as long as I can remember, and the world of friends and family that I leave at the end of every season, make me feel comfortable again for a few weeks, like I’m back in my own

skin. Then my Spanish is more varied. The *campesinos* on the sidewalk greet me with *¡Buenas!*; and in my home, I read, think, and write in Spanish, but I still speak English as I have my breakfast in the morning, and in the afternoon by the fireplace. At the end of the day, I still say *good night*.

With family and friends who have been with me my whole life, I'm surrounded by the Spanish of my memories, the automatic dialect that I've learned to correct here in the U.S., where we must step away from the most personal aspects of the language we learned as children in order to speak a border-crosser Spanish. Only there do I eat *ponqué* and not *torta* or ask my sister if *le provoca un tintico*. Words that flow from my mouth with ease in that world and which, muzzled, grow moldy during the semesters I spend working.

My career at Lesley University in Cambridge meant that English became my *pan de cada día*, my daily bread. The cycle of estrangement from my native language came to its completion with that transition. Almost all of my work is in English. This has forced me to polish my handling of this foreign language. Translating my own work, with the expert help of Mary G. Berg, my translator and friend, gradually gave me greater confidence in my own voice in this language. I feel I still don't have the dexterity I would like, that I should seek out more concise expressions in order to speak with clarity. Even so, I've recently found myself wanting to write a poem or two in English. Something audacious but fun, becoming absent from myself in that other, even more unfamiliar mask.

Many of the poems I have written in the last few years reflect on other themes, like love and my relationship with the books I read. Some new themes emerge as I spend more time here than there. I write about otherness, about being Hispanic in the United States, about the traveling and constant changes that immigration entails. By way of conclusion, and to illustrate this point, I want to quote a few verses from my poetry collection, *Después de la fábula*, which plays with the

tale of “The Three Little Pigs,” a story that my children loved so dearly. In this poem, I try to express—in a distanced and perhaps philosophic way—this sense of living and writing from a place of absence that is multiplied and renewed with every change. The poem looks upon the multiple houses that I have called home: “Tenía una casa / la busco todavía / en sucesiones, suplementos, variaciones. / Perdida está con sus sombrillas blancas / que echaban semillas oscuras y rojas/ a soles ya apagados, a vientos / que soplaron sin dejar de soplar / y resoplar.” That was how the wind blew me away from my homeland in search of a career, studies, and economic stability for my family. It continued to blow when I found love and friends and another world in another language. And it’s still blowing me. It will lead me from one place to another, in a constant whirlwind of words spoken by me and by others, and all along the Spanish language is the only thing keeping me rooted.

## Some Poems Written from a Distance

MARJORIE AGOSÍN<sup>2</sup>

### But Still

The clarity of innocence  
The sun casting its spell upon the meadows  
And rain making music on  
The broken crystal.  
Beyond the distant architecture of memory  
Mist rises like a light song  
Over the shadows of what has been deeply buried.

An illusion of an uncertain future  
A desire for the ineffable.

An infinite suitcase  
With its compass  
And photographs of the dead  
And the living  
That always extend a generous hand  
Like a willow tree.

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<sup>2</sup> The following is a selection of unpublished poems by the Chilean writer. The English versions, also unpublished, are by Celeste Kostopulos-Cooperman (“But Still”, “What Will Our Legacy Be?” and “A Dead-end Street, An Empty City”) and by Alison Ridley (“Sadness”).

A mirror that can stop the flow of time  
With nights transformed into days  
And days filled with innocence  
And dreams of ephemeral happiness.

A desire for  
Perpetual music  
A cellist's arched hand  
A violin accompanying the wild heart of the wind.

In Italy they sing from the balconies  
A woman greets others amid the melodies  
As the moon caresses her in its radiant embrace.

26

Silences are awakened by greetings  
The absence of gestures becomes a presence.  
The hyacinths have bloomed and  
A child is born in the house next door.  
The weavers continue  
Telling their stories by knitting  
Wool to shelter themselves from the solitude.  
They weave and unweave  
And repeat Penelope's gesture  
Making wonder from scarcity.

In the early light of day.  
A hand approaches you tenderly  
Searching for your grasp  
Like a universe of petals  
A threshold in your gaze.

In the moonlight  
When all other light seems to hold back,  
The diaphanous moon smiles at you  
And promises you, no doubt, an illusion.

And the words,  
The imaginary, secret,  
Forgotten and rescued words  
That smell of lavender  
Still tell love stories  
That are not read aloud, but are expressed  
In the nudity of a clairvoyant,  
Love that resides  
Within the soul.

A pencil in the darkness  
The magic of words on a luminous page  
That has been waiting for you.  
A guiding light between the lines  
When you hold the world in your hands.

The angels have returned to us  
We still have borrowed time  
Even the sea.

## What Will Our Legacy Be?

Will it be the untold stories?  
Will our silence reflect  
The history that we deny?

What will the gestures and details of the past look like?  
Will they have futures?  
How will we speak about ourselves?  
Will we talk about the things we didn't do?  
Will we blame ourselves for not having left anything  
To the children or to the earth full of illusions?

Will we still think we are as good as dead?  
And that nothing matters to us?  
Will we listen to the same music every day and  
Ease our grief with shopping?  
Will we cease to think about the mysteries of death  
And of life?

None of this is our business, say the lucky ones  
While so many knock at the door.  
We can't erase them the way we used to.  
They have arrived at the portals  
Without blankets.  
What will we do with those who remind us  
Of the sadness carried by the invisible?  
Will we invent new words to get rid of them?

And on certain nights when the fear lifts  
What will we talk about?  
Will it be about this ineffable feeling of life?  
Or about this fierce and ambiguous pain?

Will we look for the lost mirrors?  
Will we close all the doors,  
And in the deafness of the here and now wait  
In a dark room  
Where we once felt safe and,  
Where not even the gift of language will pardon us for  
So many oversights  
So many defeats?

What will the gestures of an unpredictable future be like?  
Will we think about the goodness of fate or  
About a generous angel who will  
Rescue us from the rubble?

**A Dead-end Street,  
An Empty City**

Someone looks out from a balcony.  
Suddenly in the dimness  
A light turns on.  
Two sisters talk on a rooftop.  
A couple is accompanied by the moon.  
And an old woman remembers the past.  
Without fear, I walk alone  
Poetry begins to flood my thoughts,  
I am the echoes of words.  
Tonight, in my neighborhood  
Everything is familiar and foreign  
Like the greyness of a latent darkness.  
In between the shadows  
A moment, a century  
Both time and the streets  
Seem longer.  
Time becomes a refuge.  
Only my restless steps  
And the uncertain light  
Accompany me.

30

## Sadness

In your gaze dwelt sadness,  
Sadness the color of sepia,  
Sadness the color of amber,  
Sadness of shadows.

I thought your gaze could encompass the ocean.  
Your sadness was not the azure  
Of the Pacific that welcomed you,  
Nor the gray of the Atlantic.

It was another type of sadness:  
The sadness of absence,  
The sadness of those without a country,  
Without tongues,  
Without sisters with whom to stroll.

Regina was in a field of ashes.  
You called to her...  
You made every park her tomb.

*From Ahora que me deja un minuto la vida / Now that Life's Given Me a Minute*

**Facing the Waves**

*for Gabrielle*

32

It's early on the Gulf in Florida  
and I'm sitting on the bench dedicated to Gabrielle  
who loved to contemplate the waves—  
someone mourned her name in bronze,  
an inscription in the wood.  
I feel Gabrielle accompanying me  
in her waves,  
I wonder who loved her so  
for reviving her gaze time and again  
in every stroller seeking refuge  
on this bench,  
in every pensive love-struck girl,  
in every loner on the dunes.

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<sup>3</sup> All poems by Emma Romeu Riaño have been translated by Michael L. Glenn. The poem "Whim" has never been published in English. There is an additional poem in the Spanish version of this study, "Alfombra mágica" (064-10/2020SP, p. 39), whose recreation in another language is rather unsatisfactory because of its language-specific nature. This is the reason why it is not included here.

I haven't had Gabrielle's luck,  
no words are written at my site,  
on that torn-off shore  
where I died a long time ago,  
where others used my clothes,  
wore out my deadbolts,  
assumed my life,  
as if I were dead,  
and unlike the incorporeal Gabrielle  
who is also that cloud and that snail,  
and a heron and a little fish,  
I'll be the one with the double death,  
because no one is with my waves now  
as I am with hers  
here at dawn on this other shore  
on Gabrielle's bench.

## Wings

A leaf would rather  
say goodbye  
than wait for winter;  
the lake, the gander and I watch it fall,  
we're quiet,  
wary,  
the snow will come with its enervating touch  
to remind us  
that nothing is permanent;  
and the gander  
hurries to depart  
with the greatest power there is,  
the power of wings;  
the lake, as always,  
will live on memory,  
while I  
hunt for a different reason to stay here once again  
and await the cold,  
a reason that doesn't come from defeat,  
and isn't the cloak shrouding that other city,  
or that past  
that's become a postcard  
from being endlessly penned,  
another form of snow.  
Then I convince myself that if I left  
the gander would miss being welcomed  
by familiar eyes  
when it returned.

34

I wouldn't wish the solitude  
I know on him,  
so I turn to pile up the wood,  
adjust my fur jacket  
and await his arrival.

## De Renovación de la luna / Renovation of the Moon

### The Pardon

The news arrives like migratory birds,  
exhausted from its trip,  
in it I decipher pardons  
from the temporary rulers of this land  
which belongs to me.  
They pardon contemporaries  
as if they were gods  
allowing a return to paradise  
in a real paradise,  
and doesn't this Caribbean island  
with a cellular name  
have the longest list of enchanted places?  
I wait here, peering over my balcony,  
where that other flight  
called destiny has brought me,  
I'd like to see some bird carry a pardon  
in its beak that instead of rewarding me  
would beg forgiveness for my dead—  
from exile and other torments.  
I'll sleep on my terrace,  
I don't know if such a sad bird could reach this shore,  
but here I am, waiting.

36

## My Grandfather

In Havana

he finished packing his bags:

he added up his varied coins,

the photo of his son,

and it was his turn to die.

Then he began his return

to the heavens of Altamira,

he wanted to meet his mother,

left behind,

when at twelve

the ship took him

in search of fortune.

I believe he found her

because I feel a sense of peace.

[Unpublished English Version]

## Whim

The princess has a whim,  
Let her be at the window:  
She wants to see the first ship return to the horizon.  
On her island, no one visits anymore;  
On her island, green creeping vine covers the roofs,  
Like a gloomy visor.  
Give the princess her wish;  
If she's denied, she'll ignore her charming curls,  
Never taste another bite,  
The dawn-like glow will fade from her eyes.  
The horizon is her only hope:  
Let her be at the window!

38

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From *Raíz del silencio*<sup>4</sup>

3

Beneath the house,  
hiding inside her cave,  
lives the girl who is afraid of light.  
The fragile, hidden girl  
grows inside her grey vault,  
its spiral staircase  
blocked by trap doors, flush with the ceiling,  
flush with the floor.  
Slow, slimy spiral,  
always slippery, so she cannot  
climb up,  
get out,  
let her amphibian eyes  
bear the colors green and blue,  
her thick blood,  
bear red,  
her skin, at last,  
all of her translucent  
vulnerable and musty parchment-dry skin  
become infused with light.

39

Inside her vaulted gray mansion  
the girl sleeps now.

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<sup>4</sup> These English versions of poems from *Raíz del silencio* have never been published. They are presented here by the author herself.

38

How do you keep your balance atop a furious steed,  
upon the slight thin cord you navigate?

Grace and strength. Power and elegance.  
Woman, you who sleep like a wild beast,  
are awakened like a lady, or an angel, or a princess.

How can you be the very same one who roars her desires?  
She who takes by the hand an eternal helpless child?  
You, tormented foam beating against cliffs,  
a lake mirroring slow moving clouds  
as they travel to no fixed destination?  
How can you, yourself, be so much?  
Walking on a tight rope  
with your ridiculous little parasol  
and power enough to terrify the lion tamer.

40

From *The Poetry of Clara Eugenia Ronderos: Seasons of Exile*<sup>5</sup>

Exile

*I have two homelands: Cuba and the night*

José Martí

He had two homelands  
and I none.

Borders, wounds,  
deep trenches in which the spoken word  
is silent in two languages,  
are the home I lost.

A suitcase packed with my dreams straddles  
incomplete both sides of the line.

A bed like a divided map,  
a dish of lentils in exchange for a birthright,  
an eternal window on a moving train,  
this land gazes at me from afar.

Departing, arriving, from where to where?  
Arriving, departing, mi casa/home/mi casa/home doesn't exist.

I'm a bridge disconnected from its riverbanks  
I'm that bloody flower the passing poet  
glimpsed on the black dress.

Ithaca no longer exists.

41

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<sup>5</sup> Translations by Mary G. Berg.

## Foreign Language

Let's play the guessing game of the impossible word  
that only you know you know.

Let's play the infinite game  
of the missing name.

Yesterday I understood your words, today I fear them.

Your tongue has turned to poison,  
its slow perfume festers over my days,  
over my nights.

Let's play Hopscotch,  
you toss the stone, I hop on one foot  
and I never reach Heaven.

42

Blind Man's Bluff is a good game, too;  
blindfolded, I seek what I haven't lost,  
you move around teasing me  
and all I can find is a white wall  
against which I always batter my head  
my mouth and nose.  
My soul.

Let's play the game of Master and Slave  
the subtle game of civilizer  
who can break the slave's back,  
who can smash my destiny  
in one move.

You win, I lose.

That's how the game is. You know; I don't.

You give orders; I play, I dance  
to the tune  
of your flute.

Let's play, let's play, let's keep on playing.  
Helter skelter  
higgledy piggledy  
let's play the impossible game  
of take it away here and add it there  
stick your foot in and pull it back wounded  
break your bones and lose your center  
your time  
that you've already lost.

## The North

In this strange country  
they give me too much food  
and loneliness.

They give me too much sex  
and loneliness.

Gold and heaped up treasures  
and loneliness.

They supply me with names and numbers  
and so much, for me, so much  
loneliness they give me here.

And dreams to dream  
they bring in loneliness  
and offer paradise,  
steam-engined speed,  
and loneliness.

They also  
sell you  
jars and labels  
and recipes  
for happiness.  
You open them  
without finding  
anything other  
than more of the same  
lonely loneliness  
they give  
to me and to you.

44

## Variations for a Wintry Day

1

Outside: snow and disorder  
the cave hides me.  
I was a tropical child  
in a little dress of flowered cotton.  
Wrapped in heavy cloth like drapes  
I stay home today  
contemplating the time  
that has passed  
just as the storm raging outside  
will pass, as did the one  
that used to rage inside my  
heart, now tender, that flowers  
within me.

2

What do you think now, mother,  
of this, your daughter, as she traverses  
this distant sunscape reverberating  
on ice?  
This professionally foreign daughter,  
hat, gloves, scarf  
cover her from head to toe.  
You no longer recognize her.  
exotic now: caged bird,  
her green color clashing in this white space  
just as its pallor wept into your colors  
  
gray and black strength,  
seamless solidity.

45

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