2012

Fragment from the Diary of my Return to Chile in 1990

Ariel Dorfman

Duke University

Follow this and additional works at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo

Part of the Latin American Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation

Dorfman, Ariel (2012) "Fragment from the Diary of my Return to Chile in 1990," Diálogo: Vol. 15 : No. 2 , Article 8. Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol15/iss2/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Latino Research at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Diálogo by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact wsulliv6@depaul.edu, cmclure@depaul.edu.
After two weeks back home, I’m ready to admit what attracts me most to this land, what inspires me here, how even the misery and the anguish feed me. Perhaps I’m condemned to being a literary vampire. That’s the morally ambiguous fiefdom where writers abide, all of us voyeurs, trying to turn tragedies into something unforgettably beautiful, and Chile happens to be the place where more stories and more tragedies exist for me than anywhere else, where I am familiar enough with what is being suffered to understand it and distant enough so I won’t be submerged by the tidal wave of my own witnessing.

Nowhere else in the world could I have had an experience like yesterday’s. Our family had crossed Santiago, guided by loyal María Elena, who has been faithfully helping Angélica’s mother all these years and is now assisting us a few days a week with our settling in. She took us to a remote site near her población that is being excavated by order of a judge, hoping to find bodies of the Disappeared. Kids were flying kites as if nothing could be more natural and athletes were gripping because the bulldozers had destroyed their cancha de fútbol and they couldn’t play their game of soccer, the perfect image of a Chile desperate to go on with life on the surface while secrets and bodies fester under the earth.

After watching this spectacle for a while, we repaired to the ramshackle bar El Sportivo. It was Sunday, so the place was packed, and the owners had provided entertainment, a duo at the very back, one playing a guitar, the other an accordion, belting out Mexican rancheras and treacly boleros. Nearby was a short, stubby man with a toothbrush moustache barely gracing his upper lip. Once we had purchased our drinks at the counter he hobbled towards us, an improvised stick in one hand and, with the other, putting on and taking off dark glasses, but not too quickly, and as he passed us. I wondered if he was eyeless, that’s how out of place those glasses were, but they were just a prop, because he kept looking back at me intensely. Soon enough he returned, stopped at our table, and said that I didn’t remember him but that I would, I’d remember him when he played the guitar. I was intrigued enough to begin to respond – but Angélica cursorily told him no, she’d never seen him before. But he wasn’t interested in her, he went on and on about the day when he had listened to him and his sister, this sister wasn’t here now or I’d remember her for sure, she’d married bigamously, un matrimonio fingido, he said, a fake marriage, and he spoke of the bells of a church that were chiming right now, right now.

I was sure it was a con of some sort, but was I fascinated nevertheless, even more so when one of the musicians handed him a guitar and he played an intricate rendition of a Paraguayan tour de force called Pájaro Campana. He must have been a marvel once upon a time, but now his fingers were all gnarled, they had been mangled, he slurred the words to me later, in a cogoteo, some bad guys had beaten the shit out of him, and on that occasion or another one (it was hard to make much sense of what he was saying, not clear if he was astute or drunk or both), he had been stabbed in the leg, and now he didn’t have a guitar, but yo toco porque así soy, porque la música es lo más importante, para que nadie piense que no valgo, así como me ve, I play because that’s who I am, because nothing’s more important than music, so nobody can think I’m worthless, what you see is what you get. Then he leaned towards Rodrigo and breathed at him, putas que soi lindo, si fueras mujer me acostaría contigo, fuck you’re so beautiful that if you were a woman I’d go to bed with you, and by then, fortunately, Angélica had hurried off with Joaquin and María Elena, and it didn’t matter anymore if he was trying to extract some pesos to get extra-smashed, he was a philosopher, eggs are round, he said, but human beings are rounder.

He asked for money and I gave him some, and it was the right thing to do, I had ventured into his territory with my nice clothes and my car and my family and my full pockets and he was asking for nothing more than peaje, a toll for passing through, and then his hand scurried inside his scraggly jacket and whipped out something small and dark, a domino, and even in that splinter of a second when I thought, It’s a knife, he’s going to gouge me, I also blessed myself for being so malignantly alive, blessed him for having survived all these years and for lying in wait for me in this bar with all his dignity and all his debasement, he was bringing me a message from the seething sad Chile that I could find only here, he was telling me that the heroic and martyred singer Victor Jara is dead and what is left is this musician, with his fabled bigamous sister and his shattered life and news that he doesn’t know he’s delivering, only here could I allow myself to be conned so blatantly, enter into a pact where he received pesos and I received this story, only here could I belong and not belong just enough, know the code and ignore the code, only here might this happen to me. Not a fluke, this encounter. So many others, every day. There’s a man, gaunt and leathered, with eyes so deeply set into his face you can hardly discern them, a man who...
“cares” for our scruffy Peugeot each time we park at the small supermarket on Avenida Larrain, meaning he motions with his hand this way or that way when we arrive or depart and gets a coin for his troubles. Some distress in my eyes, or maybe the deference with which I treat him, must have disclosed that I’m a compañero, that once upon a time we strode together through streets we thought would always be free, but still he can’t say compañero to me because the dictatorship has taught him not to use that word, and he won’t say señor to me because it would indicate that we are no longer equals, not even in his and my recollection, so he has found the only word that lets him keep his memories unsullied, he calls me amigo, gracias, amigo, he says, I’m his friend, attempting an impossible compromise between the joyous past and the squalid present. And each time I hear that word, amigo, it appeases a sorrow that has been mounting in me at the incessant sight of hordes of other cuidadores de autos teeming across Santiago, all those idle men and boys standing on “their” corner watching over someone else’s property, pretending to be part of some rational hierarchy because they wear a ridiculous official-looking bailey hat with a small brim, their useless, barren, non-productive activity valuable only inasmuch as this degraded Robin Hood scheme, taking crumbs from the rich, keeps the poor from roaming the city, thieving or begging or vandalizing cars. It’s protection money you dish out each time you park, a sham, because the cuidadores de autos are counted as gainfully employed in government statistics, one more example of our hypocrisy. And one more reason to feel I’m to blame, my efforts to change the unjust world have been as circular and unfruitful as what these caretakers worthy of Sisyphus do in the apathetic city, perhaps this former compañero who calls me amigo will challenge me to ditch the automobile one afternoon so I can invite him to share a drink and a tidbit of his life, and maybe I’ll offer him something from my own wanderings.

So that’s what I’m doing here. While judges excavate for bodies, I excavate for secrets in the vast pillaged wasteland of Chile, our country an overflowing reservoir of men and women desperate with stories that have not yet been told, that must be told, the only small victories they are allowed. I have tried, ever since the coup, to keep my promise to the dead, and now perhaps I am starting to make a different sort of promise, to the living, that I will eventually, once my period of silence is over – but how hard to stay quiet when everything around me is crying out for expression- yes, someday soon, maybe next year, I’ll birth those stories into the world, extract them from the land I have defended from afar, and perhaps, just maybe, I can become the place, my literature can become yet one more time the place where the living and the dead meet.