

INTI
REVISTA DE LITERATURA HISPÁNICA Y
TRANSATLÁNTICA

DOSSIER

**EL CINE LATINOAMERICANO DESDE LA
PERSPECTIVA ECOCRÍTICA**

COORDINADO POR

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Saona, Margarita. *The Ghost of You*. Translated from Spanish by Luciana Erregue-Sacchi, Lindsay Kikunen, and Margarita Saona. Alberta: Laberinto Press, 2023. 139 pp.

What rules the differences between the visible and invisible in daily life? How do we craft absence in writing? In the story collection *The Ghost of You*, initially titled in Spanish *La ciudad en que no estás*, Margarita Saona explores these questions, inquiring about the meaning of absence, which includes memory lacunes, loss, and failed encounters. The book provides traces of what is lacking and partially remains in prose through fragmentary imagery, conveying the irrationality of loss, the learning from such experience, and the ineffable nature of its remembrance.

Saona's short stories provide spatiality to absence, like in her story "Lost Things," where there is a place, which is the land of lost things where "there are two hundred million mismatched socks and as many pencils fallen out of school backpacks" (43). Personified objects influence a marginal perspective about how people cope with material loss in varied ways: "The others, of course, do not miss us at all. If they lose a sock, they just get rid of the other one and get a new pair [...] There are the detached ones. The ones who are self-sufficient to the point of not needing anything, the ones who are happy with the gold-plated pen or without it, with the scarf Mama knitted for them or with a naked neck" (43). The stories explore why we should remember what is gone and how change impacts lives, even in microdoses: "sometimes a journey in an elevator can take you so far away that there is no way of going back" (46).

Transformation is another iteration of how absence deprives oneself of an established reality organization. Disruptions in quotidian lives infuse the narration with unexpected plots that expose fears and hope about change. For instance, in "Dystopia I" an unusual increase in the number of pigeons exhorts adaptation of a new normal, and in "Dystopia II," after a collective artistic collaboration to paint the city walls of impoverished

neighborhoods, an arbitrary order imposed to cover the walls "in a dull ochre colour" (51). Another relevant changing event highlighted in the collection is motherhood, which indicates a complex relationship of familiarity and distance, like in "One Image/ Two Bodies," a story about a mother who reflects on her relationship with her daughter: "And there was Leticia, Leticia, Leticia, who wasn't Adriana, who didn't think like Adriana and wasn't moved by that image of two bodies gazing at the sea" (63). According to these stories, bloodlines and intimacy do not guarantee cohesion and resemblance, adding to the uncertainties about the foundation of lasting relationships and the mysterious work of affection.

Anchored in the Latin American fantastic tradition, Saona operationalizes processes of appearance and disappearance in daily life to produce effects of wonder and estrangement. Intertextual connections with Julio Cortázar's short stories and methodical incorporation of animal-human relationships focus on absurd cruelty and apocalyptic anxieties. For example, the story "Letter With Bunnies" dialogues with Cortázar's "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris" and includes its plot description, which tells the story of a man who vomits bunnies and writes about it to a woman in Paris. Saona's story is characterized by the sudden arrival of bunnies on her property and adverse weather that threatens their lives. While in Cortázar's tale, the emphasis is on the problematic presence of the bunnies, in Saona's, the emphasis is on their death: "Nothing about them resembles warmth, tenderness, air, movement. Ana will never again mistake life for death. Burying them has been the first task in this make-believe of tidy domesticity; this pretending that death is part of life" (80). The story challenges the assumption of an alignment between rational and natural order, highlighting the mystery of an unstructured reality, for which there are still insufficient images to grasp its incommensurability.

The theme of animal infestation relates to the cycles of appearance and disappearance, creating unsettling effects linked to both the fantastic and the horrific: "'Welcome to the city,' you told me, 'You'll find pieces of birds everywhere' [...] The twisted neck, the cold eyes. I had never seen something like this. No, it wasn't the first dead bird of my life, but it wasn't only death—which is already a lot—it was the violence of the harrowing spectacle" (86). Despite the rational efforts of the narrator to isolate herself from the "birds' problem," the overwhelming context prevents her from ignoring the catastrophe. Many characters in the collection, like her, must recognize their inability to control events that are beyond their reach and that impose to them a temporal dealignment: "You are here. It is just that I cannot see you because I live in the now, and you dwell here yesterday or tomorrow" (89). Stories like this underline the impossibility of synchronizing the person and change.

Overall, this collection immerses the reader in a compelling and complex verbal landscape full of moments of vulnerability and a lucid

approach to absence. The author writes: "Serious words, sharp words, sad words, strong, piercing, stabbing, and tender words. Those are the worst ones, the ones that will leave me exposed and defenseless" (133). Thus, Margarita Saona delivers bold storytelling that lays bare the wounds of loss, traversing sharp textures of language and inventive imagery to invite readers to confront their fears, excitement, and anxieties about disappearance and change.

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