

MARJORIE AGOSÍN

AT THE THRESHOLD OF  
**MEMORY**

*Selected Poems*



At The Threshold of Memory  
A Bilingual Critical Anthology

Marjorie Agosin



# WHITE PINE PRESS

*A World of Voices*



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1939

I

She knew how to seduce her destiny,  
predict the time of flight  
In 1939, dressed in garments  
of night and happiness  
at the threshold of a fearful  
Hamburg Harbor  
resolved to live,  
she sailed  
to Southern seas.

In 1938, the windows  
of her house of water and stone  
resisted the extreme  
horror of that night  
of broken crystals.

She, my grandmother,  
taught me to recognize  
the landscape of danger,  
the shards of fear,  
the impenetrable faces  
of women,  
fleeing,  
accused,  
audacious in their will to live.

II

Helena Broder,  
created a domain  
of papers, fragile vessels,  
clandestine poems and  
notes to be made,  
discreet addresses.  
With little baggage,  
like a frail and ancient  
angel,  
she arrived,  
although ready to embark again.

I survived next to her  
and I was thankful for the gift of her presence.

## Disappeared Woman VI

Mother

I know you are calling me  
and that your fingertips  
are covering those wounds, open  
dead and reopened  
over and over again.

When I am blindfolded  
they carry me to the  
rooms of  
delirium.

It is your voice  
new,  
luminous,  
that I hear  
after the bloodletting  
blows  
like trees  
in a  
patio of  
assassins.

Mother

I sleep in  
your arms  
and feel frightened  
by the knives  
but  
you gather me up  
from the abyss  
filled with daggers and serpents.

## Questions

I will not rest easy with my questions,  
memory's profile is like a vagabond woman.  
Grandmother, tell me about those camps  
where children were clothed in tattoos  
made of stars.

I insist, upon asking .  
about a time that I did not inhabit,  
about those seasons without calendars,  
about those meadows where butterflies  
seemed dead in the silence of .  
frozen snow.

Grandmother, who was Julia?  
Where was your house?  
Who ended up with your lilac garden  
and your basket of strawberries?

In vain the questions,  
like cracked skin,  
traverse a history that vanishes,  
a history of a rime without time  
where men  
imprisoned children  
in a barbed-wire garden  
with their golden stars  
sketched among the light  
of the butterflies.

Grandmother, tell me from your memory  
when the night was a vertiginous cloud,  
when you didn't fear ghosts  
but the men  
cloaked in darkness.

## The most unbelievable part

The most unbelievable part,  
they were people like us  
good manners  
well-educated and refined,  
Versed in abstract sciences,  
always took a box for the symphony  
made regular trips to the dentist  
attended very nice prep schools  
some played golf.

Yes, people like you, like me  
family men  
grandfathers  
uncles and godfathers

But they went crazy  
delighted in burning  
children and books  
played at decorating cemeteries  
bought furniture made of broken bones  
dined on tender ears and testicles.

Thought they were invincible  
meticulous in their duties  
and spoke of torture  
in the language of surgeons and butchers.

They assassinated the young of my country  
and of yours.  
Now nobody could believe in Alice through the looking glass,  
now nobody could stroll along the avenues  
without terror bursting through their bones.

And the most unbelievable part  
they were people  
like you  
like me  
yes, nice people  
just like us.

## AUSCHWITZ

### I

And there we were  
crouched down  
bent over  
sunk  
in that deep pain  
in the chambers  
of those soundless gases  
like  
lava from cancerous  
volcanoes.

### II

And we were not crying,  
we were not singing:  
we were praying  
with the age-old doubts  
of a people naked  
and heroic in damnation  
and there we were  
in the gas  
chambers  
in the loneliness  
of petrified, silent  
nights  
and someone stretched out their arms  
into the dark florescence of fear itself.

*An Absence of Shadows*

I

Beyond the shadows  
where the wind dwells  
among strangers,  
in far away kingdoms  
clouded in fear,  
the disappeared  
are among the shadows  
in the intervals of dream.

II.

It's possible to hear them among  
the dead branches,  
they caress and recognize each other,  
having left behind the burning  
lights of the forest  
and the tapers of dawn and love.

III.

Beyond  
the province  
there is an absence,  
a presence of shadows  
and histories

IV.

Don't fear them,  
approach them  
with gentle peacefulness,  
without vehemence and senseless rage.  
Beyond the shadows  
in the streaming gusts  
of wind,  
they and we dwell  
in the kingdom of absences.

## Far Away

My country is a slender pier  
anchored inside me  
curving between  
my knees and skin  
still damp from the sun.  
My country is a tatter  
of stars like pockmarks  
a rhapsody of useless voices  
that come out to mourn the moon  
through the ravished pelt  
of plain daylight.

My country is a blue vial  
hidden and radiant as the sea  
or the shadow of your eyes  
that never will be blue.

My country is a man  
whom I loved  
and when he kissed me  
my legs turned to rain  
to a grove  
to a boundary of holy water.

My country is the color of smoke  
and coal-heated irons  
that drowsily envelop  
the houses of adobe.

My country  
is my house with the keys  
hidden waiting for me,  
on the beach.

## THE WHALE

Gone astray, as in the dreams of love,  
the whale arrived,  
mysterious, confused  
by her cape of blue desires,  
and I began to see her teeth  
as strings of beads  
where prophecies were kept

I didn't want to be like Jonah.  
I thought it would be more than marvelous  
to travel in the whale's silky bluish  
flesh,  
to float, a hybrid,  
among sargasso  
and seaweed.

Not bothering with geneologies  
nor with terrestrial confusions  
regarding her marine destinies,  
I come near to greet her  
on the brilliant stretch of sand,  
submerge myself in her salty presence,  
her tiny eyes,  
her alluring and robust anatomy.