

My Guardian Angel *The Uncertainty of Exile and Memory*

This essay addresses emotional and physical states of disability of both mother and daughter as well as establish connections between a political history and the psychological realms of an inherited trauma established by both physical illness and exile. The text delineates the traumatic experience of witnessing my mother's stroke and subsequent brain injury. My mother has now lost her vision, her short term memory, coordination, and motor skills casting a deep impact on my relationship with her and understandings of motherhood. Coming to terms with illness has also meant engaging and dealing with the complexities of my childhood upbringing, which entailed years of political activism and sacrifice as the daughter of Chilean political refugees.

The following chapters delineate the traumatic experience of witnessing my mother's stroke and subsequent brain injury. My mother is now disabled, she has lost her vision, short term memory, coordination and motor skills casting a deep impact on my relationship with her and understandings of motherhood. Coming to terms with illness has meant engaging and dealing with the complexities of my childhood upbringing, which entailed years of political activism and sacrifice as the daughter of Chilean political refugees. I will address emotional and physical states of disability of both mother and daughter as well as establish connections between a political history and the psychological realms of an inherited trauma established by both physical illness and exile.

Nothingness, exile and memory

You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces,
to realize that memory is what makes our lives.
Life without memory is no life at all...

Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action.
Without it, we are nothing...

—Luis Buñuel

“Nothing” as a way to describe an exile condition, may sound inappropriate when I think of an entire generation of people tortured, marginalized, silenced, and collectively scrutinized for their principles, ideals and dreams for a better world. Yet to a certain extent the exiled became “nothing” as they were stripped of the familiar, having to escape to save their lives, leaving behind their extended families, their possessions, familiar sounds, smells, tastes and faces to encounter a disabling uncertainty which would devastatingly mark their lives and those of their children forever. They began their lives in exile with only what they carried with them, feeling deeply isolated and estranged from their surroundings. As Thomas Pavel points out, there are differences between immigrants and exiles. He states: “immigrants begin a new life and find a new home; exiles never break the psychological link with their point of origin” (Suleiman, 1998: 26) Susan Rubin Suleiman (1998) describes exile in its broad sense to entail “every kind of estrangement or displacement, from the physical and geographical to the spiritual” (2). Enforced travels and foreign languages signified abrupt changes, which disrupted people’s social behaviors. The moment the exiled arrives to a foreign environment, the intense personal learning and adaptation process that begins to occur accompanied by a personal crisis of remembering what was left behind, intensifies the sense of loss and uncertainty (Suleiman, 1998: 360).

The first group of Chilean exiles to arrive to Toronto in 1974 found themselves numb and silenced, overwhelmed by below Celsius temperatures with no place to go. As they arrived to this foreign country, which thirty-one years later only a few can now call “home,” immigration officers changed the women’s last names to that of their husbands, and adjusted their maiden names to shorter, simpler versions. English courses were only offered to men, since the women had domestic responsibilities to attend to while at the same time having to earn a living cleaning toilettes. To adapt to a foreign environment with the knowledge of the inaccessibility of what was left behind, becomes heart sickening and leaves the community of exiles attached to an unreachable past.

Amongst Chilean exiles there was a constant reminder that the temporary status of living in Canada would end as soon as exiles were allowed to return, a reassurance that kept people’s hopes intact. Many exiled families felt a deep sense of remorse, of guilt for leaving and settling in First World countries such as Canada. To them it seemed unbearable to think that their lives were spared while other families suffered great losses. Devaluation of personal suffering happens when one refuses a state of victimhood. In this case, refusal occurs not because a healing process might enable one to reach a state of empowerment and reject “victim” status, but because of an abiding belief that the punishments



Tamara Toledo, "Breast Feeding My Mother," 48" x 60", oil on canvas, 2005.

they endured do not add up to the “real” suffering of those left back home. A well-paid job, although degrading at times, a house, a car and other unnecessary extravagant amenities contradicted the anti-materialistic, socialist ideals that their generation fought for. Therefore, remorse led to an incessant attempt to sympathize with and help those in “real” pain. Octavio Paz (1985) claims: “our redemptive power of solitude clarifies our obscure but vivid sense of guilt” and as such “solitude is a punishment but it is also a promise that our exile will end” (196). And so, in my own community of exiles, people organized, marched, protested, boycotted, educated, and helped save thousands of lives, sacrificing

their own and those of their families. The exiles thought of their own lives as secondary to the lives of the people who stayed and suffered in the distant homeland. Their memories, hardships and nightmares became a silenced knowledge, an absent memory that had no space for retrieval. The priority would always be to protect those in greater need while denying their own.

Ironically, in the context of the complex and highly personal experience of exile, the left-wing Chilean community did not encourage the slightest suggestion of differences amongst individuals. Dependence on the community signified adjusting our individual identities to the ethos of the collective providing a place where one felt safe and welcomed. Through the exiled collective notion of community, total strangers replaced the grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles and cousins left behind, with people we might have never met had we remained in Chile. For me, to live in exile with my parents meant to adapt, to construct a new identity, to start with nothing and to be born again.

A guard and a guardian angel

In 1998 my mother took on the task to tell me a story, the story about how I was born and what followed shortly after. One would tend to believe that the birth of a child brings tremendous satisfaction and joy. Yet, being born in the mist of a military coup d'état that destroys the stability of a nation and injures the dreams and lives of thousands of people, limits the happiness of such an arrival, of motherhood.

I was born in 1973, only three months after the September 11th military coup d'état, which overthrew the Chilean government. The government in power during 1970-73 was the UP (Popular Unity), a coalition of left-wing parties led by Salvador Allende, the world's first democratically elected socialist government. With the aid of the United States of America, a brutal dictatorship with General Augusto Pinochet at its forefront, took over the country. At the time, both of my parents were university students as well as political activists. My mother, six months pregnant, was finishing her fourth year as a fine arts student.

A year after the coup, my grandmother found herself searching for the whereabouts of my mother's brother, seventeen years old at the time. He was disappeared and severely tortured at the clandestine torture centre, Villa Grimaldi. He was later sent to Cuatro Alamos, where the tortured prisoners had time to recuperate, and then sent to Tres Alamos, where surviving prisoners were finally able to receive visitors. My mother's brother-in-law was sent to Chile Stadium, which had been converted into a concentration camp. As a child I overheard conversations about both uncles being detained and tortured. The subject was openly talked about amongst adults, ignoring the presence of children, yet the issue was treated as part of a collective political problem rather than what the possible psychological impact it had on individuals. I knew that one of my uncles had lost all his teeth because of frequent blows to his face during torture, and my other uncle, although detained for months, subjected



Tamara Toledo, "Giving Birth to Wounds." 60" x 48", oil on canvas, 2005

to horrendous torture, claims his suffering could never compare to the greater losses of others. Although we were all aware of other's suffering, nobody asked intimate personal questions, much less talk about individual experiences. For instance, my aunt had to deal with the ordeal of becoming the sole protector of her two- and three-year-old daughters, while she traced the whereabouts of her husband during his detainment, and was never asked about her experiences years later. Not only was our direct family being persecuted in Chile, but also neighbours, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances were targeted; everyone lived in fear and isolation.

Amongst the confusion, unrest, and silence, although she has no clear memory of exactly when, my mother, seven months pregnant, was also detained and tortured. Thirty-one years later I asked my aunt, my uncle, and my grandmother, if they were aware that she had been arrested ... nobody knew at that time, and nobody was surprised that this had occurred.

During a breakthrough at a therapy session, my mother recalled her own experience of detention while pregnant with me. When my mother, Rosa Toledo, tells me her story, she states that for twenty-five years, her memory had refused to go back in time but now, although difficult to remember with precision, she shared her testimony. It is hard for me, as it would surely be for anyone, to internalize such a recounting of my own mother's suffering, yet I understand why my mother waited many years before speaking about her

experience, and perplexed that it ever came out at all.

Nevertheless, she feels it is her duty to explain to me what happened, since I too was present, still in her womb and defenseless during torture. I have always witnessed the deep responsibility my mother feels towards her children. But more than mere responsibility, I never understood her sense of culpability until that very moment. My mother tells me her last memory after being held at gunpoint was arriving at a military barrack peeking underneath her blindfold and witnessing bodies piled on the floor before losing consciousness. She does not know how many blows she received, whether she was raped, suffered electrical shocks, was drugged or tortured in any other unimaginable way. All I can do is read other testimonies of women also pregnant during arrest, think of my mother, and contemplate on the idea that we both felt trauma neither of us can recall. She does not know how many hours or days passed until the day she was left abandoned and soaking wet at a *población* – shantytown– where locals helped her back home before the night curfew. Once again my grandfather withheld this information from my father so he would not hand himself in and my mother kept her incarceration secret, haunting her for twenty-five years.

At dawn on December 19th, 1973, my mother's water broke, but she had to wait for the curfew to end in the morning before she could go to the hospital. My grandfather rushed her to the Barros Luco Hospital where a military medical doctor assured him that my mother would be well taken care of. The hospital where I was born was known for having many Allende supporters, left wing doctors, nurses, and administrators before the coup. After September 11th, many of the staff were detained and executed and replaced by military personnel. The first doctor to see my mother determined that she needed an immediate caesarian section; however he left her in a corridor in excruciating pain until 7:00 pm. I was born suffocating with the umbilical cord wrapped around my neck and was told that it was a miracle I did not die in the process. My mother did not see me until days later when a nurse came into a room of mothers impatiently waiting for their newborn babies. With several infants in her arms she arranged them in a row with identification bracelets and ordered the women to take their corresponding offspring.

Twenty days later, on January 8, 1974, the Canadian Air Force sent their first plane in aid of political refugees and my twenty-four-year-old mother and I, myself only twenty days old, were amongst the first refugees to come to Canada. Months later, our passports were stamped with a letter "L" by the Chilean consulate in Vancouver which would mark our identities forever as listed political exiles. Since I was already very weak, I became extremely ill during the flight and was rushed to the Sick Children's Hospital as soon as we arrived to Toronto. While I was held in an incubator for weeks, struggling for my life, my mother did not know what was wrong with me. At the time there were very few Latin American immigrants and no interpreters who could facilitate communication with the medical staff. Once again, I miraculously

survived whatever ailment I had, and my father and his guardian angel joined us a week later in Toronto.

Negligence

On May 16th, 2001, after two years of regular headaches, which she now describes as “head pains” and that rendered her unable to work as an English teacher for adult immigrants, my mother suffered a stroke that left her partially blind and disabled. As my father and I were having lunch, a meal we seldom share together, we received a phone call from my mother’s therapist claiming that my mother had fallen into a deep “sleep” triggered by flashbacks of a traumatic past from her childhood and that we should come to pick her up at her office in order for her to wake up in a safe environment, our home. We rushed to her clinic, not sure of what to make of the phone call or the situation. Before allowing us to see my mother the therapist made sure we understood that she was safe, that she had escaped the memories of trauma by falling into deep sleep and would soon wake up. Inside the room that had once heard my own confessions as a patient, lay my mother, on the floor, sleeping like a baby. I completely trusted the therapist and was convinced that what she told us was true, yet it seemed impossible for me to carry my mother (a heavy woman) down a flight of stairs and we asked the therapist if we could stay until she woke up. Time passed and the therapist told us she could no longer stay because she had a University class to teach. Nevertheless she kept waiting for something to happen; perhaps remorse from leaving us alone did not allow her to leave. My sister arrived and my mother had peed herself, “just another indication that she is in deep sleep” exclaimed the therapist. As soon as my sister burst into the room she knew right away we had to do something and my father called the ambulance. In what seemed like seconds I was asked questions by medical staff “what drugs does your mother take?” “what happened?” “why didn’t you call an ambulance sooner?” The therapist wasn’t there to help with answers.

When I saw my mother lying there, it was as if I had been confronted with trauma, in which time seizes to exist and space seems endless. Much like an earthquake that shakes your body, lifts the dust, splits the soil underneath your feet and destroys your home, when you see death approach, your whole world collapses. My mother was rushed to St. Michael’s Hospital. We were immediately sent to a room and a priest came to comfort us. My mother’s therapist joined us at the hospital and took my father aside warning him that my mother had passed away and that he should tell his daughters the news before someone else did. When my father, in disbelief, did not pay attention to her suggestions, she came into the room where we were and gave my sister and I the devastating news.

Had my mother died? My fifty-two-year-old mother, a woman I always admired and aspired to emulate, a woman who was not a grandmother yet, a woman who had suffered all her life surviving catastrophe and trauma, had she died so



Tamara Toledo, "The Smell of Death," 36" x 72", oil on canvas, 2005.

young? You cannot imagine the intense sadness, guilt, and desperation I felt at that moment. My father came in confused and in shock, without knowing what was wrong, yet deep in his heart he knew that her death could not be true.

Only a few days before we found ourselves in the hospital emergency waiting room, we had celebrated Mothers Day. Although she suffered those severe head pains that debilitated her for so long, she always made an effort to enjoy celebrations and spend time with her family. Now, in the hospital, we were the ones who prayed for her, sang to her, hoping she would listen and not leave us. After a while doctors came into the room and told us that she was alive but needed emergency surgery, which she might not survive, or that would possibly leave her with disabilities. My father and I had to make the devastating decision to sign a permission document to operate with only a small guarantee for a chance of survival. She survived, once again, and so began the rebirth of Rosacruz Durán, that same young political exiled woman carrying a twenty-day-old baby in her arms while Canada Customs renamed her Rosa Toledo.

After my mother's surgery, we all waited impatiently for days, sleeping in the hospital waiting room, not knowing whether she would be able to survive such a complicated surgery. She was finally discharged from the intensive care unit four days later. She had lost her mobility, and was not able to speak. Her first attempt to communicate happened when the therapist came to visit her. She instantly became very agitated and I was left alone with her trying to figure out what had upset her. Days later, when she was able to whisper into our ears, she told us that during her last therapy session she had asked her therapist to call an ambulance because she had begun to feel very ill. She told us that she became very dizzy, had a terrible head pain, and that her therapist had witnessed her vomit in a garbage bin before fainting on the office floor. The therapist disregarded her wish and decided it was wiser to call us and let her rest in peace. After this last visit to the hospital, we never saw the therapist again.

An "L" shaped ten-inch scar traced the right side of my mother's baldhead, the "L" being so eerily familiar, resembling the stamp on our passports twenty-eight years ago. Only a week has passed and forty-eight black staples of the incision elicit the operation. She has lost her mobility and to be comfortable, her heavy body must be rotated every 30 minutes. Yet often this is not enough, and the pain becomes unbearable, the screaming for painkillers begins, and the entire hallway can hear my mother beg us to allow her to die for the pain is too much for her to bear.

When my mother fell ill, our family doctor, who she trusted blindly, told her that her pain was psychological, and that she should seek psychiatric attention. Her family doctor and psychiatrists told her that her past experiences caused the pain and that psychotherapy would help her. Although my mother followed their advice, the headaches continued and so she asked her doctor to seek other causes for her illness. At the time, my mother requested a scan or any other exam that could indicate damage in her brain, yet they did not listen;

instead she was told that she had fibromyalgia and PTSD, which triggered the headaches. The doctor kept insisting that she was depressed, dismissing her physical pain. Two years, punctuated by doctor and psychiatric appointments, leave of absence, permits from work, alternative medicine treatments such as acupuncture, massage therapy, homeopathy, yoga, tai chi, and meditation passed by. My mother continued her search, reading endlessly, trying to find a cure for her headaches. Until the day the massive intracerebral hemorrhage took over the right side of her brain.

Milk

As I encountered illness through my mother, symptoms of my own that I had neglected for years resurfaced. I found myself inside an MRI scanner chamber where I was told to stay still; any movement would affect the image and the technician would have to retake the scan. I found out that my brain carries a benign tumor of the pituitary gland that produces a hormone called Prolactinoma. The MRI had been able to detect the size of the pituitary tumor that had caused the high levels of prolactin in my blood to stimulate my breasts to produce milk without being pregnant. In women, high blood levels of prolactin often cause infertility and changes in menstruation. I have a 4 mm. tumour sitting in the middle of my head in a bony box called the *sella turcic*. Since my eyes are directly above the pituitary gland, tumour growth may cause symptoms such as headaches or visual disturbances. I am now 31 years of age with plans of having children in the future. My memory is intensely retinal and I am afraid of what my brain could do to my vision; I am terrified of losing the ability to see how and what I paint.

As I slid slowly inside the claustrophobic scanner chamber I could not help but think of my mother, of her painful headaches and her “L” shaped scar, of her loss of vision and her loss of memory, her loss of motor skills and personality change. Why so many coincidences? Why are there so many similar symptoms and losses? And what role will secreting milk play in the healing of such trauma and illness? Maternal milk was nourishment I was never able to indulge in as an infant since my mother’s traumatic experience during labour had left her without milk, yet now, I was able to offer. The umbilical cord that once nourished and later decided to strangle me no longer connected our bodies. After 31 years, mother and child were once again reuniting, but now a cerebral hinge provided the connection, a sensorial dependence allowed support, a metaphorical association others may never get a chance to fully comprehend. The act of sliding into a hole and then sliding out made me think of my mother’s rebirth and now of my own.

After life

I find myself staring at my mother lying in a hospital bed with tubes and needles attached to her body. A deformed swollen bandaged head haunts and intrigues. She is incapable of speech and unable to move. The only sign of life

is the monitor checking her heart rate and blood pressure. Beside her, six other patients lay in their beds also struggling to stay alive. Wounded bodies on the verge of death remind my family of a past of trauma and loss. The seizures she now suffered were reminiscent of the electrical shocks she once endured. Both have left her static and mute. My family and I can only wait and witness the future that lies ahead.

Whenever I see images of the 1973 Chilean coup d'état—whether it be of the four-hour bombing and siege of the presidential palace, of bodies floating down the Mapocho river running through the nation's capital city, or of listening to President Allende's last radio address to the nation before his death—my heart begins to pound, my pupils widen and my body shivers. Bodily sensations remind me that the connections to such events are disturbingly familiar and are part of my present more so than of my past. The coup d'état has now become my mother's stroke, the presidential palace in flames is now her bleeding brain, surgery is torture, paralysis equals curfews, memory loss is the burning of books, ambulances are helicopters, the hospitals have become torture chambers, the doctors and therapists have become military and state oppressors, seizures have become electrical shocks, MRI scanner chambers are the *parrillas*—electrical torture chambers—patients are survivors, flashbacks are testimonies, her eye patch is a blindfold, the wheelchair is our exile, loss of physical abilities is the loss of a generation, loss of vision is the loss of hope, loss of short term memory is the loss of the nation's collective memory, stitches are wounds and scars my family has inherited, censorship becomes silence, and rehabilitation is synonymous of a nostalgic return from exile and a reconciliation with the past. In my mind, the scars that the dictatorship left on my mother's body, mind, and spirit, so very detrimental to her health, are inevitably bound to the collective health and politics of Chile.

What happens when memory is lost? What happens when the only person who carries your childhood memories has lost her own through illness, old age, or simply in order to survive? The fragility of memory lies in the hands of those who choose to visit her, they are the ones who carry out a process of translation and negotiation followed by a re-evaluation and adaptation of history. Recognition of the importance of memory resists silence, erasure, closure, and impunity.

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