

The Ghost of You

Margarita Saona



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Note from the Publisher

If you posed the question "Why a publisher from Alberta, Canada would decide to make available to North American audiences the work of Margarita Saona?" I would reply, "The spell her sparse, clinically precise yet mysterious prose casts upon her readers." Nothing says post-anthropocentric like Saona's stories. Her characters, resisting gender and other labels inhabit cities that while existing in the real world, refuse to be pinned down on a map. In Saona's stories, animals behave like humans, humans, like animals, or the elements, in a relentless phantasmagoria reminiscent of ancient mythology. This disembodiment is present in Saona's narrative style, having herself hovered between life and death shortly before receiving a life-saving new heart. Ever since reading the Spanish original version of *The Ghost of You*, (*La ciudad en que no estás*) all I have wanted is to give these ghosts an English-speaking home, in the hopes they can remain in the memory of their readers the same way someone's presence continues to haunt a place.

Luciana Erregue-Sacchi

Prologue: A Book about Empty Spaces

The Ghost of You arrives in my personal library and I grab it. I read the name of the author, Margarita Saona, and smile. I am sure I am going to take delight in reading it. I see its cover and the title intrigues me. I wonder why it is not entitled "Your Ghost." I start thinking about the emptiness that the narrator must feel when choosing to describe the absence of that someone, of "You." If the title were "Your Ghost," it would refer to the transformation of the body, now intangible but still present. *The Ghost of You*, however, establishes the idea of two essences: one is physically gone; the other one has become a memory.

When I hold a book, I usually have an initial reaction to it. As I finish reading *The Ghost of You*, I cannot recognize my reading experience as a past event. Therefore, I must write this text in present tense.

I start reading: "This is what I do: small word artifacts to fill the brief space where you are not" (p. 9).

I pause after this sentence and understand that the brief space becomes crucial for the narrative voice and for me, the reader. This space is built upon tiny stories. I keep reading and two sentences later, I realize that the first story has ended. I must turn the page to read the next one. Indeed, these are small word artifacts; each sentence becomes a brick of a building in Saona's city. There, at the beginning of the book, I comprehend I am faced with sublime brevity. I also perceive the narrator's longing for something. I soon notice that I do not hear one narrative voice, but many voices, and that there are even more absences. *The Ghost of You* is a book about loss.

As I continue with my reading, I find myself in the streets of a city. Sometimes it is Chicago; sometimes it is Lima; at other times it is my own city, or the one I wish was mine. I see myself turning my head and observing people. I see how people wait for a traffic light to turn green. I observe the coffee shop next to the traffic light, the door of the building located three blocks down the road, and the tip of the skyscraper that I cannot see because the sunlight dazzles me. My body reacts too. I turn around.

From time to time, I take a few steps and follow those characters who get away, looking for something they will not find. I watch them. I listen to what they say. I grab all the images I perceive and also those that do not exist, and I witness how Saona builds her city, little by little. There are fifty-three stories. Some of them are four pages long; others are only two sentences. All of them, even so, are connected through emptiness. Absence is revealed right from the beginning, starting with the title of the book. This absence persists and composes the last story, "Escapism":

"-Are you here?"

-No, I'm there" (p. 135).

After I read each story, I corroborate I have encountered a series of absences. They are all different, perceived through various senses, described using multiple techniques with sublime and delicate honesty. There are empty spaces that can be felt. We can touch memories, we can gaze at what once was present, an odour, the heat, the cold weather, a texture, the shape of someone's smile, the colour of a coffee mug, the cracked skin of someone's hands. All narrative voices have the same goal: to not forget the person who is no longer here. It is necessary to embrace all five senses to achieve this goal. In *The Ghost of You* we smell, hear, touch, taste, and see.

While I go deeper into the delicate and yet chaotic city of Saona, some names stand out. They are people who have been lost. In "The Birds," the story begins with melancholy: "Ah, Bernardo, you left. You took off and you left us in this strange city, so foreign" (p. 85). In "Chronicle of an Ill-Fated Encounter; or, The Body Has Reasons that Reason Knows Not," the protagonist had hope but it soon vanishes.

Beyond the fact that people disappear when they die or when they lack affection, there are other types of absences that permeate Saona's stories. There are losses that we mourn because the reality we knew does not exist anymore. We can feel the need of grieving from one story to the next. In "Star-crossed Commute" a woman longs for another woman until "[o]ne day she stopped searching, put her headphones back on and took refuge in her book, and the warmth of her own solitude" (p. 22). In "Fate" a couple never experiences being together because they never cross paths; in "O Let the Soul Its Slumber Break" the narrator reminisces about her long-lost identity; in "The Key" there is a key that does not

open any doors because there are no doors; in "Disenchantment II" the narrator wants to burn letters that she never received. On one hand, absences disturb the narrative voices, on the other hand, they nourish them. The city of Saona is built on the emptiness of each story.

Along with the city, I gain sustenance in the stories found in the town's dark corners and hideouts. Even those stories that never happened and those that cannot be explained are part of my nourishment. I gaze at the tightrope walker of "Summersault," up there, tottering with the wind, drawing pirouettes, because as simple as it could seem, that is his job. I also observe the protagonist of this story who tries to touch the tightrope walker's skin, but he is unattainable, beyond reach, on top of a skyscraper. At the same time, I am excited when I see all those little frogs in "Challenges." They hop and reproduce in every corner of an apartment whose owners do not seem to care. I have fun when I see the crocodile that gets into the apartment, walking slowly, with his jaw open. Then I see Lucía, "The Girl Who Ate Time," a baby who eats clocks. I can see Lucía in her highchair devouring time and her playful manners make me smile. She is eager to satisfy her appetite by eating every minute. Time disappears, the present time is ephemeral, all hours vanish through her fingers, my fingers, and I can only remember a couple of seconds that are now in the past. That is why I take refuge in Margarita Saona's city; I believe this is the exact moment to do it because "[a]mong the millions of people who are here and those who are gone, among the millions who will come, suddenly it is your absence that I find when I walk, out of sync, in the city where you are not" (p. 89). I want to see and feel *The Ghost of You*, and Margarita Saona guides me through the city where I should start looking.

Naida Saavedra

The Ghost of You

What I Do

This is what I do: small word artifacts to fill the brief space where you are not.

This is what I do: small word artifacts vainly trying to fill up the vast space of your absence.



Fallen Angels

Who is telling this story? Who, you wonder. Or perhaps, that is what you would ask yourself if you could, because it has been a while since you were able to articulate such a sharp, pointed question. You try to get closer to your granddaughters or to your daughter to ask them something, but you stand there stuttering and only the anger, the anger of not being able to put one word after the other even to ask the time of day or what's for dinner or who has the newspaper. Only the anger comes, not the words; so you clench your fists and turn around grumbling, mumbling your frustration, the same frustration that you see in their faces. But then you look for her, you sit by her in the backyard, her hand in yours, and you don't need to speak because she stopped talking to you a long time ago, but you sit by her, her hair so white and so soft and those grey eyes that once looked at you lovingly, her hand in yours, and everything is fine. Angela. But you cannot find her, as if it was all a bad dream, a dream that is worse than the daily dream of getting up in the morning and taking a shower and pretending to read the newspaper which you have been unable to understand for so long. Only today is worse, because Angela is not in her bed or in the backyard and you don't understand what is going on nor who the hell is telling this story. And you think (if you think at all) that she is probably upset with you again, and you ask yourself what you have done now, all the guilt, all the guilt whirling about in front of the deaf anger of your Angela, who loved you once, and who now methodically hates you. She hates you so much that she has slowly been leaving the world and she can't see or hear anymore, but she still lets you get close and spoon-feed her and run your fingers through her soft, white hair ... and you ask yourself (if you can still articulate a question in your mind) if that is what peace is, if now that the constant complaining is over, the grumbling about the colour of the sky, or the maids doing a bad job of cleaning the furniture, or the high cost of living, or the noise of the neighbourhood children—if that lost look that she wears on her face now that there aren't any complaints anymore, if this silence is peace. But if you ask yourself (if you can honestly ask yourself) you probably know that it is not; it probably is a form of death. But it is not death, because she is next to you, and you can have her hand in yours and you



can feed her and run your fingers through her soft white hair. But no, in this instant she is not here, and you don't know who is telling this story and you can't ask where your Angela is.

Your children, your siblings, they all think she can't forgive that story, the story of that woman who has become unmentionable, both she and the story, unspeakable. But it is not that. Your guilt is even older. No, your guilt is not really about infidelity, nor about the dedication to your work, nor about all the things everybody speculated over the years. No, none of that, and even though you can't articulate it anymore, you know it. It was something else. It was taking her from her homeland, having brought her to a place that never stopped being "this country of Indians," without friends, without family, to this land that she never understood, not even after giving birth to five children in it. She couldn't understand that your sister's Basque last name didn't prevent her from saying crude things in a language of savages; and she couldn't understand that you believe the Indian who worked in the kitchen had the right to eat the same foods she ate. She could not adapt to the altitude of the mountains nor to the humidity of the coastal towns and, even though she never said it, she could not accept that her children were foreign to her. And you saw your sweet Angela become embittered with age and complain day after day of the smallest details, without ever daring to tell you to your face that you took her away from her home and brought her to this unfathomable place. "Vale un Perú"—she had heard that expression many times, as if it was worth something ... she could not imagine, so young, without having gone further than a few blocks from her neighbourhood in Madrid, what it would mean to be a foreigner in this land. But you, you should have imagined it. Now she doesn't complain anymore, and her face has regained its sweetness. She doesn't speak, even though sometimes, with a shaky voice, a voice thin as a thread, she sings: "*Qué bonitos ojos tienes debajo de esas dos cejas ... What beautiful eyes you have under those two eyebrows ...*" And her eyes sometimes look sad, but at peace. And what now? Where is Angela now? That is what you would ask if only you could.

You approach your daughter, formulating the question in silence, moving your lips so you are ready to articulate the question when you face her, but she moves toward you and fixes your tie and she tells you to sit in the chair, Papá, people are going to start arriving soon and the question remains on your lips: Who the hell is telling this story? She leads you to the chair and seats you and you don't protest, because it has been a while since you came to terms with the fact that now you were supposed to take orders from your daughter. First, she banned you from driving because you couldn't see well anymore, you couldn't control the steering wheel and you veered towards the curb, which was dangerous ... Now

she gives you orders for everything, even for the little things, and the smallest details, and you acquiesce, because you wouldn't know what to do without her, especially after the day you got lost. Waiting and waiting, and yes, yes, we are going to drive you to see Uncle Carlos for Christmas, yes, we'll pick you up later, but you wait and wait and nothing. Shit. Why did you have to depend on someone to take you to see your brother on Christmas? So you made up your mind and went out to the street and started walking, but soon all the streets looked the same and you walked and walked and walked until December's sun seemed to bore into your head and the streets became bigger, less familiar, and the sun and the noise of the cars, the fumes of the buses ... Don Luis!! The girl shouts to you and leads you to the sidewalk. What were you doing over there! And then your daughter crying and scolding you like a child, never, never are you to go out alone again, while she takes care of the sores the sun left on your skin. And Angela?

Reading the newspaper, watering the plants, sitting out in the garden till dusk holding Angela's hand. And on birthdays, cake and ice cream. That was it. In fact, they have taken away your book too, the one you were writing. Yes, the ministry wanted to publish it this year, they told you. You knew that what they wanted was to prevent you from messing it up even more. You had been correcting it for so long and you don't know at what point the sentences began to sound absurd and no matter how much you insisted, you couldn't sort them out, make them make sense, so they cut you from doing it and made that mockery, that self-published edition. But why the hell did they care at that point? Even your nine-year-old granddaughter had said it: Who was going to read that book, anyway? A book on public health in Perú. Who? Of course, what she wanted was for you to stop working on the book for a while and start making paper airplanes with her ... but she was right. Why should anyone make such an effort if no one was going to read that book? But it was yours nonetheless and they didn't have the right to take it from you like that. When Angela did not want to talk to you anymore, you still had your book, your desk, and your work schedule and ... Who the hell is telling this story?

If you believed in God perhaps you would think it was God who was telling this story. But you don't. It's a shame that your daughter didn't let you present the arguments against the existence of God to the little one. You were sure that she would have understood. But, if you were to believe, if you were to believe in God, it would have to be a very perverse god to invent such a nightmare, a dream so bad that you cannot even articulate a sentence, where you cannot tell your own story, and Angela isn't there. And you don't understand who the fuck is telling this shitty story.

The oldest of your granddaughters sits next to you and sadly caresses your cheek and doesn't say what she often says, "Ay, papacito! Your beard prickles. We don't feel like kissing your cheeks like this! Come with me. I am going to shave you." She does not grab your hand or walk you to the bathroom to wrap you in hot towels and lather and leave your face clean and smooth to then give you a kiss on each cheek and tell you "You see! Now I can kiss you!" No. Now she just touches you sadly ... and that black dress on a girl so young, but you don't understand fashion ... Only then you realize she is not the only one dressed in black. People arrive and greet you crying. They hug you, whisper words you don't quite understand, and move away, and all, all of them are dressed in black. So, you notice the casket, a black casket in the middle of the room. You stand up trembling, you move in closer. A huge tremor paralyzes you, one step, another, and another, and you lean in to see, and it is your own face, your face, the intimate face that conjures up your own self, even though death blurs away certain features, it is your face you look at in the coffin. Shaking, with eyes full of tears, you ask yourself (you would ask yourself if you could): Who is the motherfucker who is writing this fucking story? Your daughter comes closer. She hugs you, but you move away from her and look her in the eye and out comes the impeccable question from your lips:

"Have I died?"

She gives you a disconcerted look, a sad look.

"No, Papá. It is Mom."

And now you look again, and you see her. The face of Angela, disfigured by death, emerges through your tears. You see her and cry and you understand that God does exist, because only a ruthless, perverse God could write a story like this one.

A Dream

In the dream I open a newspaper, and in its pages I see a game or a map or a game with a map. On the map, among many names, I see his name repeated many times, crossing over other names in multiple paths. But I don't know the rules of the game, and the legend on the map is unreadable. I wake up without knowing if his name is the way, or the destiny, or a mere obstacle in the path to the finish line. I don't know what the finish line is either. And the dream is transparent in its own opacity.

Sorceress Apprentice

I have conjured up the wind.

I am now one of those initiated in the secret arts. I have conjured up the wind, and now it lives in my house. At night it lulls me to sleep with its song, and in the morning, it wakes me up gently blowing on my hair, tangling and untangling it all over the pillow. I like to see it trying out different voices when it runs among my pots and pans, among the pages of my books, among the ferns. I like the sound of its sighs between my sheets. Its breath dries the clothes that I hang in the bathroom, its fingers play symphonies on the dreamcatchers that hang in my windows, and, at bedtime, its arms gently rock my children to sleep.

I will never forget the first time, my own wonder at seeing it dance to the slightest movement of my hands. I used to feel so powerful then ... One undulation of my fingers and the wind arrived at my house with its fresh breeze suit. Sometimes it filled my house with birds or butterflies, or it gave me a beautiful rug of dried leaves. Sometimes it arrived with the sweet scent of the sea. And sometimes it even brought the sun with it. A small gesture of my hands and my house was charged with laughter: my children playing with the wind. Hardly a glance and it would whisper secrets in my ears, stroking my arms, its arms around my waist, holding me by the hips. A subtle pun and the wind was by my side, blowing my sails, and I was ship, cloud, wave, windmill, bird.

I have conjured up the wind. I have conjured up the wind, and now it lives in my house, but a storm hides in every nook, a storm haunts every corner of my house. I never see it coming. I do not know what I do to unleash its fury and it always, always, catches me off guard. It might be a forbidden word, sometimes a sudden move, sometimes the tone of my voice, and the wind becomes enraged, and none of my spells can calm it down. On the contrary, my attempts to appease it only aggravate it and it blows, tosses, turns, becomes inflamed. My pots and pans roll on the floor, and the chimes shatter against the windows. The wind roars and rips the ferns out by the roots. I cannot find a magic word to soothe the winged wind. Its ire lifts me through the air, throws me against the walls, hits me, hurts



me, leaves me wounded, sad, sore. Its fury shakes me up, harrows, scores my flesh; its punches split my lips, blur my vision; its voice becomes a deafening hissing in my ears. And when the pain almost makes me want to die, the storm gives way to the gentle breeze full of songs and tenderness. And I do not understand anything. Soon my wounds heal, and I cannot remember how it all began nor how it ended, or where the nightmare came from. I look through potions, spells, incantations ... and I don't understand.

I have entered the world of those initiated in the secret arts. I have conjured up the wind. But my highest achievement in the arts consists of hiding the traces of this storm on my body by concealing sores and bruises with powders, creams, and tanning lotions. Those who come to my house praise the lushness of my ferns, the harmony of the bamboo chimes on my windows, the absence of dust on my shelves, the flavour of my stews, the length of my hair, the smiles of my children. Some comment "Look how happy she is, she has tamed the wind." And if my voice sometimes cracks, the others do not hear it, absorbed as they are by the sparkle in my eyes. And if the sound of the storm reaches the ears of the neighbours, they convince themselves it is only the television. I know well the chemistry of those spells and the others never see the storm hiding in every nook.

I have conjured up the wind. I have conjured up the wind, and now it lives in my house. But a storm lurks around the corner.

Softer Hands

The cream was a present. An expensive cream. It will make her hands softer. She applies the cream thinking of her Teresa, back in Maranhão, tall and pretty, and doing so well in school. She wouldn't spend money on hand cream: Teresinha needed a new school uniform. But the lady told her "Your hands are too dry," as she gave her the cream.

"Hold my hand!" whines the blonde toddler in the crib.

"Yeah, Sophie. I'm going."

She rubs the cream off and holds the blonde girl's hand.

"Now, now, sleep well, Sophie."

María leans over the crib knowing her back will hurt by the time the nap is over, but Sophie cannot sleep without holding her hand. Bent over, she reminds herself she will be able to send her baby money next month and wonders if Teresinha still remembers her rough skin caressing her cheeks before her good night kiss.