

# Exile At Home, or At Home in Exile

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**M**OST STORIES END WITH DEATH. MINE BEGINS WITH IT. One of my earliest memories is from August 1, 1991, in Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil, standing next to a tall *jequitibá* tree. I remember my father holding me in his arms, as I saw my eldest sister lying down, asleep, inside a wooden box. My other two big sisters were running around among the trees in the vast green field that surrounded the group of people gathered around that wooden box with my sister. “Wake Anita up, daddy. Let’s go home!” I said impatiently. Or, perhaps, someone told me this is what I said. I learned about death before I learned my ABCs. I learned about the absence that only death brings before I learned to read and write. Standing at her grave twenty-six years later, I wondered, how did I get here?

## I. Exile

In his last letter, dated November 1820, Keats wrote to his closest friend, “I have a habitual feeling of my real life having past, and that I am leading a posthumous existence.” Keats describes precisely the feeling of what it is to be an exile: having left a life, a country, a family behind, one lives as though life has already been lived. The recurring question becomes: when will one be allowed to return to that previous life? The uncertainty of what the future holds affects us all—uncertainty is the trademark of life after all. But for the exile, the absolute uncertainty inherent in daily experiences creates a constant state of trepidation, as the foreigner’s life is put on hold or tossed about by the powers that be. That trepidation is so clearly described in Walter Benjamin’s last letter to Theodor Adorno, weeks before his

death in 1940: “The complete uncertainty about what the next day, even the next hour, may bring has dominated my life for weeks now.” Being cast into the unknown, facing the unknown, waiting for something one does not know, is the only constant for the exile.

I had never thought of myself as an exile until the day Dr. Zsuzsanna Ozsváth asked me a question. We were enjoying a cup of espresso in her living room, sitting next to each other around the wooden dining table, one afternoon in 2013. As I related my anguish of being caught up in a bureaucratic limbo, not able to travel to attend my grandmother’s funeral (which I had to watch on a laptop screen), she asked me, “Do you feel like an exile?” Then it hit me. This was precisely the word that described the heavy emptiness I carried because of distance I could not physically overcome. She placed her small warm right hand on my cold left hand, now resting atop the table after it had been gesturing to tell the story, and I became pensive and wondered, “Should I have told her all this? Should I have burdened a Holocaust survivor with my woes?” She looked me in the eye and asked again, a question that I have been asking myself ever since: “Do you feel like an exile?” I immediately answered, “No.” How would I, the one who had pledged allegiance to the flag of the United States of America *and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all;* and pledged allegiance to the Texas flag, *Texas one and indivisible*, every single morning for seven years, from sixth to twelfth grade, be an exile? How could I, who felt more Texan than American, be an exile?

When I was a child, I thought that calling this place home made me an American. I thought that learning English as fast as I could and earning the best grades possible, that ranking first among my peers in middle school, earning a spot in All-City and All-Region orchestras as principal cellist throughout middle and high school, being selected to compete at All-State UIL string ensemble competitions, joining yearbook staff, being elected president of my high school class, being awarded the Good Citizen gold medal by the Sons of the American Revolution, being elected president of the National Honor Society chapter of my high school, receiving the President’s Volunteer Service Award gold medal for over 400 hours of service, becoming an AP Scholar, and finally graduating valedictorian of my high school class, all meant I had fulfilled the so-called American dream. The “American dream” was a promise I learned about when I was just beginning to learn English in sixth grade. It was a promise that made me persevere through all the many hardships that came my way. Being an American meant working hard to pursue happiness. It meant getting goose bumps when watching my sister, a drum major, conduct her high school marching band as they performed the Star-Spangled Banner every Friday night at the football games. Above all else, being an American meant seeking to fulfill a promise: that no matter where you come from, if you work hard, you can achieve anything in this country.

Four years after Dr. Ozsváth posed that haunting question, I was able to travel “home.” At least, I thought home is where I was going. As soon as I arrived, I found myself in a foreign place—I did not recognize the streets, the smells, even the language was filled with a particular vernacular not part of my stuck-in-the-past Portuguese vocabulary. The contradictions I experienced were many: while not recognizing the street where my family home was located, I had forgotten what it was to walk into an old house my feet still remembered. The shock of walking into my grandparents’ house and seeing that my grandfather was no longer sitting on his favorite armchair, to see that grandmother was *really* no longer in the kitchen, washing some seasonal fruit in the sink. I had forgotten what it was to see tiles on the floor and remember, to see Portuguese tiles on the kitchen walls and remember. I had forgotten it all: what it felt like to hold in my hands the small wooden chair my grandfather built with his own hands for his children in the 1950s, in which my sisters, cousins, and I sat in the 1980s and 1990s.

Upon my arrival, the first place I wanted to visit was the cemetery, to see my sister’s grave. But, my homecoming visit was marked by an overwhelming sense of loss, and even worse, of so much absence, that the cemetery was the last place I visited. In my mind, Brazil was the place to eat at grandma’s house, to watch her cooking recipes, like the time when we followed an apple pie recipe that turned out too sweet. It was the place to sit and watch my other grandma crochet doilies and floor mats. Now, Brazil was the house that collected dust, the empty furniture intact in a vacant home filled with my childhood memories and my mother’s unused sewing machine. It was the place to visit my loved ones among the grass fields and flowers left by those who do not forget their dead.

On my last day in the country, a Saturday morning at the end of July, my aunt took me to the cemetery. There I visited my paternal grandparents’ graves. For the first time, I saw my grandmother’s tomb laid next to my grandfather’s, the love of her life. Some years before, she visited us in the States. On her last night, sharing my room with her, I fell asleep to listening to the story of how she had met my grandfather when they both worked in a hotel restaurant. She spoke of him with such admiration; though she had been his widow for over a decade, it was as if she was more in love with him than ever before. Now, seeing the concrete slabs laid next to each other, I did not cry. I felt closure seeing they were finally reunited in a single plot of earth, side by side. My aunt showed me other gravesites too, those of the great-grandparents I never knew.

We left, and drove ten minutes northeast to the other cemetery. It was a bright sunny morning, just like the one in my earliest memory. Passing through the entrance I had seen so many times in my mind, we walked, and almost instinctively, I knew the path.

I led the way. The walk was not as long as it had seemed when I was little. We arrived at the place I remembered so well. My maternal grandfather's name etched in the bronze plaque, as it had been my whole life. Now, the plaque had a "new" addition: my mother's mother, who had lived with us the first twelve years of my life, the grandma who the last time I saw her, hugged me so tightly I could feel the knots of her arthritic fingers against my back. Both names there, yet I could only read *her* name: "Anita da Rocha Valente," written between our grandparents' names. Reading her name, released all tears: a burning pain creeping through the esophagus to choking the throat, to watering the eyes. Reading her name, my family name, was a punch at the mouth of the stomach. A sister, born four and a half years before me, who should have been standing next to me as we visited the graves of our elderly ancestors long passed.

When a child dies before her parents, the universe is forever turned upside down. It is a pain that those who survive must carry inside. She was born on the first of Tishrei, according to Jewish tradition, the day the universe was created. Her existence was wholly done, from beginning to tender end. Seven is after all the number of all perfect things, the completion of all hard work, the day of rest, and so her life ended in the year she was meant to rest. And yet, the nagging, the recurring realization of her death goes on. The constant absence is always present:

Silver light through semi-closed blinds awakes me.  
Full moon reflects from wall mirror onto half-open eyes.  
From sleep to sleep she disrupts my nightly darkness.

I lie on my back; she tugs at the blanket over my feet.  
I awake; she stands near the foot of my bed.  
Silver light touches her face and golden hair.

Fiery gray eyes search my face:  
"You're so much older than me now."

Cold little hands find my feet:  
"You're so much taller than me now."

She raises her arms and puts hands atop her head:  
"I was this little when fire burned me inside."

She points her finger towards my face:  
"But you're still my little sister."

Yes, my dear, during the day you are awake in my mind  
And you keep me awake at night.

"Can I sleep here tonight?"  
Before I can answer, she jumps in and snuggles up to me.

Night falls like dead black birds from tall trees.  
Overnight, silver light turns to golden rays.  
Through half-open blinds, the sun arrives.

She flees.  
I shiver out of my sleep.  
The bed is already made-up next to me.

## II. Home

Standing at her grave, after the release of decades-old locked-away tears, it was at her gravesite that I felt strangely at home. For the first time in Brazil, the ground beneath my feet felt like home. I came to see her. In seeing her, I saw myself. I saw my mother. I saw my sisters. I even saw my father. I saw *all* of us, there. All our names in her name, etched on a bronze plaque on the ground. A part of me, under that earth, under my feet. This is why I always wanted to return. Perhaps because I had seen the view, this view, so many times in my mind, I had not forgotten it, as I did almost all the other places I revisited in the country. Returning to the same spot of my earliest memory twenty-six later, I realized perhaps it had all just been a made-up memory. The cemetery, the grass, the sun, felt the same. But there was no tree. The tree must have been in my imagination, or perhaps that earliest memory is not what it used to be.

When Victor Hugo was exiled from France, in 1851, he did not know if he would ever see his country again. He returned nineteen years later, in 1870, following the Franco-Prussian war and the proclamation of the Third Republic. Hugo's exile was made more difficult because during those long-drawn-out years he could no longer visit the grave of Léopoldine, his beloved eldest daughter. For a number of years after her death, Hugo had made annual pilgrimage in September or October to Léopoldine's grave. In the poem he completed in November 1855, "To the One Who Stayed Behind in France," Hugo wrote,

Why are you sleeping such a deep and endless sleep  
That you don't seem to hear me when I call your name?

When he wrote these lines that show the guilt that exile brings, he had not been able to visit her grave for some years already.

She knows, doesn't she? that it hasn't been my fault  
If, these four years that have passed away so soon,  
I haven't gone and prayed at the foot of her tomb!

Portuguese provides the perfect possibility of missing the unknown, the yet-to-be, the never been, the already gone. The word *saudade* is all these things and more. It is the idea that not even the cemetery is as sad as an empty armchair or empty kitchen. *Saudade* is missing grandma's made-up rhymes for the noisy washing machine, grandpa's sapphire eyes I no longer see, it is hearing God's voice in low-pitched night-winds shaking tall glass doors and *jequitibá* trees. *Saudade* is the realization that I remember her because of photographs I have seen of her. I remember her holding my hand because there are photographs where she is holding my hand. What I remember is not my memory, but rather images I have looked at so many times before. In not remembering the concreteness of her existence, memory pains even more. It is the recollection of the horror, the nostalgia brought about by the experience of exile.

In my thirty-one years of life, I have lived eleven years in Brazil and twenty years in the United States. After this experience visiting Brazil, I finally understood that I feel most at home not in a physical location, but when I'm surrounded by people who have accents in English. German accents, Hungarian accents, Spanish accents. Accents are markers that there was a life before this one, that the world existed before this one was so. Some of us carry worlds inside that slip through our tongues all the time. None of us remain at the place of origin. Our surnames come from other shores. We are never quite separated from the places of origin, yet we are all also at home in the English language, which we have chosen to build our lives around.

In the end, the memory objects that we carry (a poem, a wooden chair, a cello) tether us to an elusive place of origin, a supposed place of return, that sometimes, we no longer desire to belong or return to. Were it not for the grave we could not carry out, that place would only be a memory, a recurring memory. As Josef Brodsky wrote in his moving essay, "The Condition We Call Exile," "even having gained the freedom to travel, even having actually done some traveling, [the exile] will stick in his writing to the familiar material of his past, producing, as it were, sequels to his previous works." In recent years, she returns more and more often. A painful remembrance, but it is only natural that this happens with time. As Brodsky says, "the past is always a safe territory, if only because it is already experienced," because of our innate "capacity to revert, to run backward—especially in its thoughts or dreams, since there we are generally safe as well—is extremely strong in all of us, quite irrespective of the reality we are facing."

Yet another way to describe exile is that one never returns from it. Mario Benedetti, who innovated Spanish-language poetic interpretations in his vast oeuvre of poetry books, was forced into exile from his native Uruguay during the country's civic-military dictatorship from 1973 to 1985. He was forcibly separated from his wife, who stayed behind caring for their aging mothers, for over a decade.

He always longed to one day return home. When he finally returned, he concluded that “one never returns from exile.” In his poem “Pero Vengo (But I Come),” Benedetti perfectly describes the feeling of not being able to ever fully return.

More than once I've felt banished  
and eager  
to return to the exile that's banished me  
and then I feel like  
I don't belong anywhere to anyone.

He continues,

can this mean I'll never again  
cease to be an exile?  
that here there or anywhere  
someone will always be watching  
and wondering  
what's this guy doing here?

It is almost as if once at home, the exile wants to return to exile, the place he feels truly at home.

When the children of Israel left the land of Egypt, they adhered to Joseph's request, "then you shall carry up my bones from here with you." Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, into the land of Canaan. I often wondered: "What could the remains even mean?" After visiting my sister's gravesite, I finally understood: it was never about the remains, but about the last place of rest. My exile now feels not to be from Brazil. It is not an exile from the place where flowers grow on concrete. That is not the place I now long to be, it is not the streets I long to walk on or the air I long to breathe. Mine is an exile from the place that on that sunny Saturday morning in July resounded loudly in the thumping beat of my heart in my ear, "you too shall end here." **A**

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