

REINA ROFFÉ

THE REEF

and

EXOTIC BIRDS: FIVE STORIES WITH RARE WOMEN

UNIVERSITY PRESS
OF THE SOUTH

2021

Copyright 2021 by Reina Roffé.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the Publisher.

Published in the United States by The University Press of the South.

Printed in France by Monbeaulivre.fr

E-mail: unprsouth@aol.com ; universitypresssouth@gmail.com

Web pages: www.unprsouth.com; www.punouveaumonde.com

Reina Roffé.

The Reef And Exotic Birds: Five Stories about Rare Women.

Second English Edition.

viii + 144 pages. Latin American Studies Series, 27.

© Reina Roffé, 1987. Original Title: *La rompiente*. Cuarto Propio, Santiago, Chile, 1998. ISBN: 956-260-140-4.

© Reina Roffé, 2004. Original Title: *Aves exóticas. Cinco cuentos con mujeres raras*. Leviatán, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2004.

ISBN: 987-514-067-8.

Foreword by Mónica Szurmuk.

Cover Art by Micahel Brunelle. Reproduced With Permission.

Work published within the framework of “Sur” Translation Support Program of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Worship of the Argentine Republic.

1. Latin America. 2. Argentina. 3. Spain. 4. Political Repression. 5. Novel.
6. Short Stories. 7. Transatlantic Writing. 8. Women’s Writing. 9. Exile.
10. Defenselessness.

ISBN: 978-1-931948-92-0 (US First Edition: 2010)

ISBN: 978-9-403645-65-0 (European Second Edition: 2021)

FORWARD

Mónica Szurmuk

Ready to leave her native Argentina, the protagonist of *The Reef* asks herself, "Will I find, wherever I go, the splendor of a voice?" This question epitomizes Reina Roffé's search to find a literary voice that shines and illuminates the nuanced lights and shadows in exile. In her writing, Roffé has always sought ways to find an uneasy, yet compelling passage through silence and into words. The forms of exile Roffé describes are multiple: on the one hand and very concretely, the exile of Argentinean dissidents during the military dictatorship of 1976-1983, but also in a more general way, the alienation of women in patriarchal society and what French feminists have described as the ambivalent relationship of women to patriarchal language.

Roffé was born into a Sephardic family in the bustling Jewish population of Buenos Aires in 1951. At that time there were 250,000 Jews in Argentina, most of whom lived in the city of Buenos Aires and its environs. While only ten percent of the Jewish population of Argentina is Sephardic, the Sephardic presence in the arts is considerable. Across the street from the house where Roffé grew up and lived until the age of sixteen, there was a small synagogue attended by Moroccan Jews like Roffé's maternal grandparents. Jewishness as lived experience is a constant in Roffé's work and, as we shall see, is creatively used in *The Reef* to allude to the entrenched psychological and emotional scars brought on by the dictatorship.

At the age of twenty-one she published her first novel, *Llamado al puf*. Argentina was then awash with new ideas, and young people were in the street celebrating the end of a succession of military governments and the first free elections in twenty years.¹ Revolution was in the air and several guerrilla movements were recruiting among the most brilliant and promising young people in high schools, factories, and universities. In keeping with the spirit of the time, *Llamado al puf* narrates the story of a young woman who leaves the family home. The novel is fresh and lucid, and its careful prose anticipates later work by Roffé. Many

established critics, however, came down hard on the young writer for what they perceived as a privileging of the personal and familiar at the expense of big historical developments. Four years later, Roffé published a second novel in which she attempts a more realistic style. *Monte de Venus* takes place in a girl's high school that works as a microcosm of the larger world. The stunning beginning, where a teenager moves with difficulty after having her genital area waxed, serves as a reminder of how women's bodies function in society, even and especially in a society that was attempting an overhaul of sexual and social norms. While French feminist theorist Luce Irigaray claims women's sexuality is multiple and self-contained—vaginal labia rub each other producing pleasure without the need of an external agent—the presence of women's sexuality is more nuanced here, a site of pleasure but also of outside control and design.

Monte de Venus was published a month before the bloody military coup of 24 March 1976 that overthrew the government of Isabel Martínez de Perón. The military regime that ruled Argentina until December 1983 was the bloodiest in the country's history. Thirty thousand people disappeared, the press was under stern censorship, and a system of terror was installed in every aspect of life. *Monte de Venus* was among the many books banned. Roffé went into a period of deep silence. In 1981 she participated in the University of Iowa's International Writing Program where she started writing *The Reef*. She stayed in the United States until 1984 and returned to Buenos Aires after the end of the dictatorship to put the final touches to *The Reef*, which won a prize for best short novel (Premio Internacional de Novela Breve) in 1986 and was published in 1987 by Puntosur. In 1988 she left Argentina permanently to live in Spain. In 1996 she published *El cielo dividido*, a novel that takes up some of the themes of *The Reef*, focusing on a protagonist that returns to Buenos Aires after exile. The organization of time and space in the novel owes much to Jewish motives, and sexual desire between women is one of the key themes. Roffé's most recent work, *El otro amor de Federico: Lorca en Buenos Aires* (2009), is a fictionalized account of the few months Spanish poet Federico García Lorca spent in Buenos Aires in 1933-1934. Roffé also published two biographical studies of Mexican author Juan Rulfo: *Juan Rulfo: Autobiografía armada*

(1973), and *Juan Rulfo: Las mañas del zorro* (2003). The short story collection *Exotic Birds: Five Stories With Rare Women* was published in 2004.

When *The Reef* was first published in 1987, it became a critical success and a cult book for a generation that had come of age during the dictatorship. It was published by *Puntosur*, a small publishing house committed to the dissemination of experimental literature, especially of younger writers who had not had the chance to publish their books in Argentina because of the repression during the dictatorship. *The Reef* is part of a corpus of literary works known as “exile literature” produced during the dictatorships in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, Uruguay) by authors writing either in external or internal exile about displacement as a philosophical, political, and historical situation. Some of them, such as Roffé herself, the Argentinean Tununa Mercado, the Chilean Diamela Eltit, and the Uruguayan Cristina Peri Rossi, also wrote about the exile of women in patriarchal society in general, and in the political orders of dictatorship in particular. That this novel by Reina Roffé brings together all these different exiles and can articulate the connections is one of its biggest accomplishments.

Readers coming to the text for the first time will be struck by the narration in second person “you” throughout the text, a narrative strategy further marked in Spanish by the use of the formal “usted” as opposed to the informal “tú” or “vos.” Most critics think this is a narrative strategy that distances the narration, making the voice less attached to a body, a strategy that might represent the retelling of a story from the perspective of a psychoanalyst (and the use of “usted” points in that direction). Psychoanalysis is very popular in Argentina, the country with the largest percentage of analysts per inhabitant in the world. This estranged voice that retells the story of the protagonist could very well be that of an analyst. Another interpretation that complements rather than contradicts the previous one is that the second person actually dissociates what is said from who says it, therefore separating the voice from the body and displacing the possibility of corporal violence. In a totalitarian system where an

utterance could warrant torture, rape, and disappearance, disembodiment a voice was a means of resistance.

The protagonist is indeed a victim. A key scene in the novel depicts the experience of a military raid where an informant points out victims for the military, people fated for disappearance, torture, almost certain death. This character is called “the student” in the novel, a man posing as a student (or maybe he was in reality a student) while working for the military who had the power of life and death over the people he came in contact with—the protagonist included.

The novel starts with the arrival of the protagonist to a foreign country (most probably the United States) in the first part and finishes with the decision to leave home (Argentina) in the third part. In between, a second part shows the starts and stops in the writing of a novel that the protagonist is embarking on unsuccessfully. This “novel within the novel,” it should be pointed out, plays on canonical writer Roberto Arlt’s *Los siete locos* (1929), a novel about a group that attempts to sabotage the government. That in the 1970s the attempts at subversion are carried out by the government in what political scientist Eduardo Luis Duhalde has called “the terrorist state,” is important in this rendition where the state is no longer challenged by terrorists but has itself become a terrorist state that threatens its own citizens. Roffé also rewrites Arlt’s novel in another way by highlighting the paradoxes in writing practices that use women as metaphors.

If the novel cannot be read without a gender perspective, it also needs to be read within the key of Jewish symbolism. The circular time, which is at once a feminine time lodged within the rhythms of the female body, also works to point to another kind of time, the Jewish calendar, based on the rhythms of the country in the Northern hemisphere. The Jewish calendar gives a tempo to the novel. It gives an alternative rendition of time—circular and embodied—grounded in religious practice, in lived experience, in the sensual, in food, love, and desire. In the novel this is very well represented by the experience the protagonist has of her grandmother’s food and the relationship of weather and food that gets distorted in the Northern hemisphere when the protagonist lands on Rosh Hashanah at the beginning of fall. The weather brings back memories of Passover in Buenos Aires and seems to

turn the calendar on its head, yet another instance of the disorientation produced by displacement.

The Jewish calendar serves Roffé in different ways. As a calendar based on an agricultural tradition, on natural rhythms of which the cycles of production and reproduction are part, it provides an order outside that of politics and repression. Indeed, the insistence in the novel on feminine cycles is very poignant, especially because some of the practices of the dictatorship included gender-based mechanisms of torture (such as rape and the appropriation of the children of disappeared pregnant women), and also gender-based mechanisms of control aimed at limiting the possibilities of movement of women.

Published in this volume also is the wonderful collection, *Exotic Birds: Five Stories With Rare Women*. It collects five short stories that focus on the lot of women in contemporary society and that are significant of an array of new literary interests of Roffé. Interestingly enough, in this volume different experiences of sexism are explored: the exiled Argentinean woman who encounters the man who assassinated her friends twenty years earlier, the Spanish teenager who suffers the violence of her father, the young Sephardic woman who in the 1920s agricultural colony in Argentina yearns to study and create her own life, the young Argentinean journalist hired to work in a Spanish multinational corporation under false promises, and the child whose mother is about to be abducted by the paramilitary. The ills of the twentieth century frame the stories of the lives of these women: the *Shoah*, the Latin American dictatorships, the displacement of millions of people. Roffé's prose calls attention to itself; sometimes hard and sometimes tender, her words never fail to evoke.

Roffé's work has received much critical attention. *The Reef* is undoubtedly her best-known work, and it has been reedited three times—once in Mexico by the Universidad Veracruzana (1987), once in Chile by the feminist press Cuarto Propio (1998), and once in Argentina by Alción (2005). Both *The Reef* and *Exotic Birds* have been translated into Italian. While several of her stories have been included in anthologies in English, this is the first translation of a novel and a collection of short stories by Roffé into

English. Readers have a chance for the first time to immerse themselves in Roffé's world. Both *The Reef* and *Exotic Birds* are artful and luminous texts, reminders that literature and writing matter and prevail.

Note

¹ After the overthrow of President Juan Perón in 1955, there were elections in the years 1958 and 1963, but Perón's party was not allowed to participate. Both of the governments chosen by election in 1958 and 1963 were overthrown by military coups.

Works Cited

- Duhalde, Eduardo Luis. *El estado terrorista argentino*. Barcelona: Argos Vergara, 1983.
- Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.
- Roffé, Reina. *Llamado al puf*. Buenos Aires: Pleamar, 1972.
- . *Juan Rulfo: Autobiografía armada*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1973.
- . *Monte de Venus*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1976.
- . *La rompiente*. Buenos Aires: Puntosur, 1987.
- . *El cielo dividido*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1996.
- . *Juan Rulfo: Las mañas del zorro*. Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 2003.
- . *Aves exóticas: cinco cuentos con mujeres raras*. Buenos Aires: Leviatán, 2004.
- . *El otro amor de Federico: Lorca en Buenos Aires*. Buenos Aires: Plaza y Janés, 2009.

THE REEF

PART ONE

I

You spoke about a background music, you said: the Albinoni Adagio was somewhere between an obstinate buzz and a relaxing hum that resisted the buffeting of the long flight like a desolate fortress. However, behind the monumental curtain of those signature notes was a loud cracking like the sound of a light switch. A bad sign?

Once on terra firma, the exorcism of the music was swept away by the bustle of the airport. Luggage, passport, customs—each completed step brought you closer to the revelation of that dark zone you weren't able to get out of your mind during the trip and that, moments before your departure, had appeared in you like a last minute wave of cowardice. By the time you reached the final stage, you realized that the will to compose yourself wasn't strong enough to free your heart from the spasms that were so publicly revealing your nervousness.

No one was waiting for you. You immediately realized that the one who'd promised you a warm welcome would not be meeting you. And in spite of that certainty, you tried to convince yourself that this person would show up any minute. So like a frightened, cornered dog, you waited next to your luggage for the impossible to happen.

It pained you to recall the scene your feverish imagination had envisioned for the anticipated arrival: there were flowers, silent embraces, and emotional gestures; you had even imagined the car that would drive you through the city and the words you would use to express your first impressions during the ride. Then there would be a small comfortable house with bottles to be uncorked and a deep, restorative sleep. But life is full of unexpected turns.

The arrival area of the airport was emptying out as you grew more and more perplexed and, since no one noticed you, you concluded you'd be there until Judgment Day. As a grand finale you should immolate yourself for some cause or turn yourself into

a statue dedicated to deception or fright, you thought, ridiculing your predicament.

You actually felt comfortable being unnoticed that way, but your legs began to weaken and your whole body emitted cries for help. One of the attendants from your flight was pulling along a light, practical bag with the carefree attitude of someone who had just finished her shift and was looking forward to several hours of free time.

The mere thought of moving your luggage weighed you down and prevented you from leaving your spot; you wanted to abandon everything then and there and disappear, float up like a balloon and explode in the sky.

The attendant, perhaps mistaking you for a novice porter or a mentally challenged person, asked, with that unbearable desire to serve, if she could help you. Your answer was awkward and ambiguous, but she understood that you had to make a call and that you didn't know how or where or with what to do it. She cheerfully pointed to a dozen phone booths right in front of you and explained that all you had to do was put ten cents in the slot and dial the number. She also deduced that you didn't have any change and couldn't move with so many bags, so she handed you two shiny coins and offered to watch your things while you made the call. Your numb feet were miraculously set into motion, although the thought that no one would answer or that they would speak a different language was stirring in your brain.

When you mentioned the name of the person who hadn't met you, a voice in your own language said, as if she had known you forever: "Oh, it's you. Come on over right away," and she gave you all kinds of detailed directions that you paid no attention to because you weren't interested in saving money on the cab by taking shortcuts.

The next step, literally, was that the attendant put you in a pompous yellow car with all your bags and sent you off.

Once you were entrusted to chance and to the fresh air that you inhaled deeply, this new phase became enjoyable. As you gradually approached the center of the city, the human landscape became more and more fascinating. You recall, in spite of memory's tricks, someone telling you (maybe the one who hadn't met you) that this city, already so bedazzling to you in all sorts of

ways, was the Tower of Babel itself, perfect for people without roots or for those disgusted by the absurd entelechy of identity. It was an intergalactic place that belonged nowhere.

In fact, it became evident during the drive that everyone seemed a little bit foreign, as if each person came from a different galaxy. You felt that a carnival was passing before your eyes and you didn't even have to move—it was moving for you; a masquerade ball, you said to yourself as if you already knew, that follows its own laws and where the most horrible and the most beautiful things could happen in unison. You hadn't arrived in a city but in a state of mind.

And in that animated state, you said, you came to a street lined with trash cans piled higher than you had ever seen. Or were they trash dumpsters? The house you were looking for was on this poor, dirty street. It resembled all the other houses in the neighborhood; with metal gratings covering the windows, they looked like small convents, small prisons.

"Welcome," a green-eyed girl called from a window in fluent Spanish with a slight accent. She led you to an apartment on the ground floor, which seemed more like a second floor, where all that was lacking were huge spider webs hanging from the ceiling to make it look, you said, like the den of Dracula's helpers.

Your bags filled the entire entryway, so you had to go to the kitchen to find a place to sit down. Just the two of you. She, the person who had answered your call, the same one who informed you—while she treated you to a beer and you admired the design and quality of the bottle—that *that old friend or that postponed love*, shall we say, wasn't there, but that she had left a note and a pair of gloves for you.

The gloves were made of rough, cruel wool, like the winter you were beginning to anticipate just by reading the letter. It was a letter full of excuses and recommendations. She even dared to tell you how to take care of yourself in that dangerous intergalactic place, which, scarcely weeks before, she had described as an enchanting buoy that would save you from the shipwreck.

We can agree that the now postponed reunion wasn't the main reason for you being there, but rather it was a stimulus, let's say, a good pretext for you to get settled into a new life. However, the flight—you interpreted it as a flight—of that person to another

continent just moments before your arrival was a low blow, a gratuitous wounding of your good faith, a seditious deception.

The girl, who had left the room while you were reading and re-reading and even wrinkling up the pages filled with references, returned with another beer and the address of a hotel. Once again, someone was sending you off.

You felt the hot blood running through your body and, determined not to be intimidated, you stood up like an offended queen and said you were leaving. No, thanks, you didn't want any more beer; you didn't like beer, you almost shouted; you drank only wine or whiskey or champagne.

You went out to the street where it was getting dark. From another pompous yellow taxi, you observed the galactic dimensions. Everything was large in this city: the avenues, the buses, the stores, the parks, the people's feet, the smells, and most certainly, too, you thought, the sense of helplessness. You were soon disappointed to learn that the skyscrapers were all concentrated in a very small area of the city.

The driver watched you through the rearview mirror; when your glances met, he asked you something you didn't understand. And maybe he didn't comprehend your silence, your sad smile, and the abrupt aversion of your eyes. Was that why, when you gave him a handful of copper coins for a tip, he threw them out the window and grumbled God knows what? For that reason or because he thought the coins were a miserly compensation for his services, he made you remove your own bags from the cab and he sped off furiously.

You and your suitcases were deposited on the sidewalk in front of a faded, filthy hotel. The friend of *that old friend or that postponed love of yours* had a peculiar obsession for economizing and making everything even more miserable for you. Gathering your courage and your brute strength, you picked up your luggage and went in. Let's say you advanced as far as the repugnant red carpet allowed.

When you managed to look up, a shaking Medusa head behind the reception desk left you cold as stone. Did you say like stone? She had a deep, rough voice and she was talking to an old man who was sneaking drinks from a bottle hidden in a brown paper bag. The drunkard, a guest at the hotel, could scarcely stand,

but before stepping back from the counter, he straightened up like a brave soldier to let out a huge belch that knocked you out of your petrified state. You filled out the form that the dirty hand of the Medusa gave you. You paid for one night, which turned out to be less than the taxi, and crept along toward the elevator with your bags. The key said Room 211.

The second floor consisted of a long hallway that branched off and was lined with innumerable little doors, like a honeycomb. On this floor, you explained in a mocking, festering description, all that remained of the carpet were threads of a red past; the wallpaper, like the faded satin remnants of a luxurious box of chocolates, was peeling off. A screech, which you exaggerated by saying it pierced the bare brick walls, stopped you from entering 211. Another Medusa, this one small and senile, stuck her white serpentine curls out of the neighboring door and, sniffing you from top to bottom, scolded you as if you had been the one creating the ruckus. Yes, now there was no doubt: the friend of *that old friend or that postponed love of yours* had taken revenge on your arrogance by sending you to a homeless shelter, one for insane people.

Room 211 is occupied, occupied, occupied, you repeated as the receptionist shook her gorgon mane and returned the same key to you, sending you back to the same room. This time, still trembling from fear, you went quietly and squinted closely at each number in the beehive until you came to the same damn door again. You returned to the lobby. From the unintelligible insults that the Medusa openly hurled at you, you understood one key word: the letter *B*. Your joy was so great that you wanted to kiss the mouth that kept snapping at you and covering you with spittle. The room was 211*B*. The main hall led to another hall in an annex that only a supernatural eye could've detected; you, far from feeling like Wonder Woman, admired your ability to survive what you considered utter destitution, as proven in this insignificant event.

And the room was certainly destitute. Nevertheless, you pardoned the small child's bed, the foul odors capable of causing a fatal illness, and the sheets riddled with holes. What you couldn't forgive was the fact that there was no bathroom. The beer was having its inevitable diuretic effect and was fighting to be

eliminated without delay. You crossed your legs tightly, but even that didn't prevent tears from welling up in your eyes. Finally, faced with the reprehensible task of wandering through the hallway again to find a bathroom, you opted for testing your aim and you relieved yourself in a clean glass that was on the nightstand.

Your next mission was to find out with certainty from where and from whom the noises were coming that were penetrating the walls, the ceilings, and the floors. Often during the night, you tried to erase the violent horror-movie scenes that the noises evoked in your mind, but the images persisted. Assaulted by those visions, you appreciated, you said, the fact that the room was an enclosed cube with no windows.

Where had you ended up? Did you really miss your own immaculate bed or the bed of your own immaculate stench? Was there anything secure, promising, or happy about your immediate past that merited nostalgia? You were no more or no less disconnected than before, and things were no more or no less sordid in this place than in the one you abandoned twenty-four hours before. There were differences, that is true; distinct situations, but little or nothing to regret.

The hot blood circulating through your body started to boil again. You looked at the time—it would soon be dawn. You found the letter in your coat pocket; skipping over the paragraphs about excuses and guilt, you looked for useful references, an outcropping where you could get a foothold. “Miss Key,” wrote *that old friend or that love of yours* in a cramped but flamboyant handwriting, “will give you a nice place to live and maybe a job. She speaks an impeccable Spanish and she, poor thing, is nothing but marvelously impeccable. She lives in a suburb some distance from here, but it's beautiful and peaceful, a paradise compared to the city. It's the best thing for you, believe me. Miss Key is a *master key*.”

Believe me, believe me, you repeated disbelieving, biting your lips, crumpling up the paper. Paradise, Key, impeccability. As you put on your shoes and faced your luggage again, you were thinking: havoc, narrow-minded, disgusting. And you set off like a missile toward the light.

And so, on a pleasant, sunny day, you found yourself in a café eating a hamburger and silently criticizing the furniture and