

Preface

Little is ever told about Madagascar, my home country. What usually makes the news consists of extended documentaries and reports about the fauna and the flora of the country, but somehow the story and the history of the 20 or so million people who live on the island are seldom mentioned. In parallel to this silence in the news, it seems rather ironical that euphemisms are a large part of the Malagasy culture, which puts an important emphasis on public speaking, but leaves many things unsaid or somehow flavored to sound less blunt than they really are.

My entire life I have lived and thrived through silence, and realized that it was within silence that my voice could be heard. In this creative nonfiction piece, I tried to show how silence reigns within my family and around the tumultuous political crises that my country faced, but which were and are still rarely heard about past the island's borders.

While writing, I gathered most of my inspiration from Judith Ortiz Cofer, a Puerto Rican author who succeeded to keep her full credibility through her writing while effectively and beautifully making use of the poetic side of creative nonfiction. While Cofer's narrative style is largely based on oral storytelling, which she effectively uses in her essay *The Woman Who Slept with an Eye Open*, I discovered at a young age that my life

often has a soundtrack. Cofer writes the story of María Sabida and María La Loca, I sing the songs of Jean-Jacques Goldman, 'Zay, and Des'ree. Punctuating my piece with a song allowed me to have a natural through line by writing about how I interpreted each verse of the song that I chose. At the same time, I was able to find my buried silent voice, express it, and reflect on it around the choruses of the song.

The biggest challenges that I faced while dealing with creative nonfiction were memory and bilingualism and their relation to the truth. On the one hand, some of the events I touch upon happened a few years ago, and I was highly concerned that not talking or reflecting about them earlier would taint their authenticity and alter their "truth." Moreover, I could not remember a few events and their chronology very clearly and was trying to fit them within the poetic context of the song that I chose.

On the other hand, my piece revolves around a French song, for which I have chosen to provide a somehow literal English translation. As an author, I was concerned that my translation and the reports that I have included about the political difficulties in my country inherently included a personal interpretation, which could be argued to be a severe alteration of the truth.

Judith Ortiz Cofer wrote the following in her essay *¿La Verdad?: Notes on the Writing of Silent Dancing, a Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood (a Memoir in Prose and Poetry)* to comment on the place of truth in each person's memory:

I chose to write *Silent Dancing* out of *my* deepest emotional connections
to *my* unique version of past events.

This quote effectively translates the balance that Cofer is able to keep between what she considers as the truth, poetry, and the incorporation of Spanish. Her book *The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry*, which follows the story of first-generation Puerto Ricans in New Jersey, is another great example of her mastery of this balance through creating nonfiction. Through my piece, I have tried to find this balance, allowing for my own interpretation of the lyrics I chose and of the events that affected my mother and my motherland, to allow for an audible experience that juxtaposes silence and its soundtrack in my life.

Silence

Soundtrack: **Sur Toi (On You), Zazie**¹

<i>I write on that which I endure</i>	<i>J'écris sur ce que j'endure</i>
<i>The little deaths, on the wounds</i>	<i>Les petites morts, sur les blessures</i>
<i>I write my fear</i>	<i>J'écris ma peur</i>
<i>My lack of love</i>	<i>Mon manque d'amour</i>
<i>I write from the heart</i>	<i>J'écris du coeur</i>
<i>But it's always</i>	<i>Mais c'est toujours</i>

November 2000:

It was the day before the funeral, and the entire family was there to bid him a last farewell. I had never seen my grandmother look so sad. As she looked at him a last time, she cried and screamed: "He's still looking at me! He's still looking at me. You're still looking at me like you used to look at me before? He's still looking at me, people," while being held by my uncle who kept a very serious expression that I had never before seen on his perpetually jolly face. Then some men I did not know entered the room, laid down the first white raw silk wrap on the floor, and lowered the love of my grandmother's life, now a limp and cold body, on the wrap. They then went on wrapping more silk around him, and after all the silk wraps that all the family members, acquaintances, and friends had brought for mourning were wrapped around his body, they tied them all together at seven strategic points, which I could not recall even the day after.

¹ French singer and songwriter. "Sur Toi" is from her album "La Zizanie."

My mother had not cried. She just called my dad, who had stayed with us at home. It was around noon when my father's cell phone rang. He answered and he said to her "I'm sorry. All my condolences." I knew then that my grandfather was finally free of all the pain he had been going through these last few days. He was gone. My grandfather was gone, and he was not going to come back. It was the first death I remembered, the first death that touched my family. Being 14 years old, I did not know what to tell to my mother when she greeted us at the entrance of my grandparents' house after we drove to be with her. A lone tear fell from her eyes, and that was it.

*On that which I could not say
Could not live, did not know how to keep*

I write in verse

And against all

It's always hell

Which pushes me

Sur ce que je n'ai pas pu dire

Pas pu vivre, pas su retenir

J'écris en vers

Et contre tous

C'est toujours l'enfer

Qui me pousse

Mid or end of 2001:

It was during lunch, or maybe during dinner. I was sitting at my usual place, to my left was my father and to my right, my older sister. My seat was in the corner of the room closest to the fridge. My mother was sitting to the right of my older sister, who didn't act as a shield that maybe I had hoped her to be, when the news broke down.

"I have breast cancer," my mother said. What happened after this statement is a complete haze in my memory. Those four words were like the atomic bomb that fell on Nagasaki and my head and thoughts were stuck in the mushroom. I probably did not look at anyone: in the Malagasy culture, interlocutors do not meet each other's gaze if

they are talking about very serious matters, so I am quite confident that my sisters' and my eyes must have been locked on either our plates or some detail of the tablecloth. Which tablecloth it was is also unclear to me: hopefully it was not my favorite one, the one that depicts Malagasy people performing the traditional dance of the Highlands, the region where my family comes from.

I don't remember if either my sisters or I asked any questions. Nonetheless my parents still provided answers and a few explanations: "It's curable. We did a lot of tests." They apparently had gone to see Boz, our family doctor – may he rest in peace -- after they discovered that she felt a bump in her breast while showering. Then they apparently did an armada of tests and a biopsy, which all confirmed the diagnosis. And they, my mother and my father, were now telling us because my mother was to start getting treated soon.

<i>To throw the ink on the paper</i>	<i>A jeter l'encre sur le papier</i>
<i>The blame on those who left me</i>	<i>La faute sur ceux qui m'ont laissée</i>
<i>Writing is always moving back</i>	<i>Écrire, c'est toujours reculer</i>
<i>To the moment where everything crumbled</i>	<i>L'instant où tout s'est écroulé</i>

December 2001:

There was so much, too much to deal with.

One the one hand, my mother reading to me what was written on the box of her red-bottled medicine for her chemotherapy and casually mentioning that sudden death was listed as one of the secondary effects of the drug. On the other hand, a presidential candidate who declared he was going to win the elections after the first round and who rallied the population to demonstrate in the streets when the voting polls claimed that he did not.

Inside the house, when my mother would come back from her chemotherapy, she would lay on the couch in front of the TV, making the most horrendous gagging noises I had ever heard, clutching the blue rectangle bucket in which she seemed to empty everything she had inside of her. Outside, thousands, tens of thousands of people sat every day to listen to politicians after politicians supporting the candidate who did not win in the first round, but who should have won, but he did not win because the votes were rigged, and because the old government did not want to leave their power position, but they should win because they said they would. A stream of politics that entered through one ear like a bubble-gum that you extend to its maximum length, and came out from the other ear.

There was so much to deal with, but I could not say anything about it. I did not have the correct words to comfort my mother, and I ignored whether she wanted me to say anything. When it came to politics, my parents were strict: be very careful when you speak, you never know who is listening. If the wrong comment falls into the wrong ear, you could find yourself in prison in no time. My parents often discussed the situation by relating daily events, but seldom formed real opinions by clearly choosing one side; or at least they did not do so in front of my sisters and me. Maybe, just like me, they were repulsed by the idea of going to prison, so kept their internal debate just that: internal.

My mother once said that one could not know anymore who to trust, even children betrayed their parents.

My mother once thought that maybe it was her lack of emotion, or her inability to completely express her emotions, to talk about them, show them through fountains of tears like her sisters had done at their father's funeral, that triggered her to find out about the cancer that had been growing inside her for ten years already. My grandfather had been very sick in the last days before his passing. He was so in pain that, one month shy of turning 80 or 85 years old, I cannot recall, he called for his own mother. Doctors had given him morphine; my aunt, also a doctor, had ran out of all possible pain killers that she had ever known about, but he was still in pain.

What he died of, no one is sure. We suspect it was from some sort of terminal cancer, probably prostate cancer, but no one can confirm it. In my memory, my grandfather is teaching my older sister and I how to play *fanorona*, a Malagasy board game, a long-lost cousin of Alquerque and checkers. I also remember him teaching me how to play the guitar, a daunting task given that, unlike him, I was left-handed, thus could not hold the guitar in a way that made him comfortable, but my fingers were also so short that they could barely hold the strings down. Whatever it was that took him away from us, he kept it secret, for neither he nor we had a clue of what was rotting his body.

My father had driven us to my grandparents' house right after he received the call from my mother. Once there, there were no more guitar lessons: my grandfather was lying down, cold as a rock, in my grandmother's transformed living room, and after that, he was never really mentioned again. Sometimes my mother says: "Oh I really miss my father," but this happens on very rare occasions, and it definitely did not happen the first year after his death.

<i>One doesn't write</i>	<i>On n'écrit pas</i>
<i>On what they love</i>	<i>Sur ce qu'on aime</i>
<i>On what doesn't pose</i>	<i>Sur ce qui ne pose pas</i>
<i>Any problems</i>	<i>Problème</i>
<i>This is why</i>	<i>Voilà pourquoi</i>
<i>I don't write</i>	<i>Je n'écris pas</i>
<i>On you</i>	<i>Sur toi</i>
<i>Don't worry</i>	<i>Rassure-toi</i>

There is only one rule my father insists on: don't ask, "What if this had happened instead of that?" What if I had gone to France instead of going to the United States? What if my mother had not been sick? What if he had won the presidential election after the first round without any manifestation and a dead economy for 6 months? Don't ask "What if?" and you will not lose any of your time pestering yourself with alternative versions of your life that could not even have happened or with unrequited emotions and tumults.

<i>I write on that which hurts me</i>	<i>J'écris sur ce qui me blesse</i>
<i>The list of strengths that I have left</i>	<i>La liste des forces qu'il me reste</i>
<i>My miles of wasted life</i>	<i>Mes kilomètres de vie manquée</i>
<i>Of pain in prose, of broken verses</i>	<i>De mal en prose, de vers brisés</i>

Sometime between the end of 2001 and the beginning of 2002:

My mother explained to us that she had cried that morning, as she combed her hair and it all fell. She was losing her hair, as was expected from her chemotherapy. Seeing her hair on her brush made her cry for the first time because of “this beast,” one of the nicknames she gave to her cancer. She then added that it was also the last time she would cry, she was done.

She was so done that a few days or weeks afterwards, when she only had a few patches of hair left on her skull, she came up to the living room where my two sisters and I were busy being couch potatoes, probably watching some teen show, and asked who could help her shave her head. The three of us just stayed there, looked at her for a few seconds, then all shook our heads no. “OK fine, then I’ll do it myself, even if I obviously cannot see the back of my head.” No reaction from us.

Some years after this incident, my mother, in full remission, asked us why we refused to help her. Because she now had her hair back, none of us hesitated to tell her that we were just terrified at the very idea of shaving her head. Her chemotherapy made her so weak, so sensitive to any type of odor, and so lethargic that I was deadly afraid that shaving her head would hurt her even more. But how can you say this to your mother, when you are healthy and she is literally battling for her life? You do not say it. You just refuse, in your teenage way, to shave her head for her.

I write as one meows under the moon

J’écris comme on miaule sous la lune

During the night, I dip my quill

Dans la nuit, je trempe ma plume

I write the abscess

J’écris l’abcès

I write the absent

J’écris l’absent

I write the rain

J’écris la pluie

Not fine weather

Pas le beau temps

I write that which can not be said

J'écris ce qui ne se dit pas

On the walls, I write on the roofs

Sur les murs, j'écris sur les toits

Writing is always going back

Ecrire, c'est toujours revenir

To those who made us leave

A ceux qui nous ont fait partir

March 13, 2002:

It was the day I turned fourteen, and as my father correctly pointed out, it was a day I would not forget.

It was a Wednesday, the day on which every school in Antananarivo has no class in the afternoon. The primary school children had finished school at 11:30am and were already busy running around and scream at the top of their voices in their playground. Exactly fifteen minutes later, the secondary school bell rang with its usual the two-second beep tone. When we heard that fateful tone, we would gather all our belongings – pens, erasers, books, notebooks, hunger, and thirst – at a ridiculously fast speed and shove them in our backpacks. We would then finally be let free, storm out of a room after screaming “Au revoir Madame” or “Monsieur” and join in with the primary school children to create a gigantic buzz.

My sisters and I would usually linger within the school ground for about ten minutes, then walk to the parking lot of the nearby supermarket which was about two minutes away. There, our mother, or father, or driver, or some combination of them, would pick us up. Sometimes the car was already waiting when we arrived at the lot, sometimes it swung by after five minutes, and we would slowly get in and be on our way home. Whatever the case, we never really rushed, trying to take as much advantage of the

presence of our friends and of people watching, which seemed to be the coolest things to do when you were in middle or high school. I guess some people watched us as well: we were the props for their people watching and they were ours.

But the day I turned fourteen, things did not go as planned. We were right in the middle of the political crisis, my mother was in between chemotherapy sessions, and on that Wednesday, at 11:45am, my father called me and said: "We are here. Hurry up." My father almost never asks us to hurry, and given the tone of his voice, I knew something was not right. So my sisters and I did as we were told. We hurried, said our goodbyes, and before we knew it, we were zooming off home.

Today is definitely a day you will not forget. That was all that was said.

An hour later, when I was busy chewing my rice, my father said: "Today, I got a threat, they wanted the [company] car back. So we had to rush home." The political turmoil had also affected my father's company and some workers who wanted to see someone else at his position had decided that they would take his car, hinting at the use of violence if required.

I went on chewing my rice.

My father did not give up the car, one of the benefits he received from his job that kept him busy more than twelve hours a day, including weekends. It was his way of protesting and protecting himself and us from falling under the pressure of fear and illegitimacy. It was also a question of honor: he would have gladly given up the car and his position, if the company's administration officially asked to do so. He refused to fall under the pressure of a group of workers who called him a dinosaur because he had

been at the company for so long, who felt superior to him and the rest of the administration.

Happy birthday to me!

My older sister and I, who today both live in the United States, literally tens of thousands of miles away from home, share this inability to keep in touch with our parents and little sister on a regular basis. We usually send them sporadic long emails and spend hours at a time on the phone with them, but we can't seem to be able to trickle this flow of information and somehow share it evenly over an extended period of time.

I must admit that, even so, my sister is much better than I am. I can go for a month without any type of communication and have been called more than three times in order by my parents, and forced to actually either call or write to confirm that I am still alive.

One doesn't write that they lack nothing

That they are happy, that all is well

This is why

I don't write

On you

Don't worry

On n'écrit pas qu'on manque de rien

Qu'on est heureux, que tout va bien

Voilà pourquoi

Je n'écris pas

Sur toi

Rassure-toi

I don't write or call because nothing is new. I am still in school, I still have homework to do, nothing out of the ordinary happens in my day-to-day life. So I stick to my family's mantra: No news, good news.

I write when I hurt for the others

When my grief resembles yours

When the world bares its teeth

I make it take the blame

J'écris quand j'ai mal aux autres

Quand ma peine ressemble à la votre

Quand le monde me fait le gros dos

Je lui fais porter le chapeau

January 2009:

I had gone home to Antananarivo, after a year and a half in university in the United States, so that I could be with my parents and my little sister for the New Year's celebrations. The day before I left home, the mayor of the capital auto-proclaimed himself the new highest authority of the country, thus declaring that the current president, who had also auto-proclaimed himself president seven years prior, had no longer any power.

What followed this declaration were riots between the population supporting this new authority – which soon enough named itself the “Government of Transition” – and the other Government that was already in place. Violence started to explode here and there; jobs started to disappear here and there because foreign investors started to pack their bags; shops, especially large supermarkets which had extensive food sections, were looted and put on fire everywhere. The population was angry, the population was hungry.

*I write the indelible blues
It seems less difficult to me
To tell all rather than one
And to have the final word*

*J'écris le blues indélébile
Ça me paraît moins difficile
De dire à tous plutôt qu'à un
Et d'avoir le mot de la fin*

February 7th, 2009:

It was the bloodiest day of the protest. The Presidential Guard fired at the crowd in front of the Presidential Office that the crowd wanted to enter. To do what? I do not know. Probably try to force the people who were there to leave and allow the Government of Transition to take siege.

According to the New York Times, more than 20 people were killed that day. One journalist, who used to go to my high school and who graduated about 3 to 4 years before I did, who used to be friends with people I know, died. He was filming the event and after the military opened fired and people started moving in panic, he did not get up.

This bloody day was the bloodiest day that had hit Madagascar since August 10, 1991, the day when the same exact event happened: the crowd was marching towards the President Palace located a few kilometers away from the capital, and the Presidential Guard fired.

Only a handful of international media reported about what happened on that warm February day in Antananarivo. I guess I had somehow hoped that the world should take a bit more interest in what was killing my country, what frightened every Malagasy soul and frightened me even more. My parents and my little sister live in Antananarivo. Even though I knew they were not among the protesting crowd, fate could have made it

so that they just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. But fate did not do that.

<i>It must be that she is already be gone</i>	<i>Il faut qu'elle soit partie déjà</i>
<i>In order to write "Don't leave me"</i>	<i>Pour écrire "ne me quitte pas"</i>
<i>That they no longer live under the same roof</i>	<i>Qu'ils ne vivent plus sous le même toit</i>
<i>From him to come tell her that he's leaving</i>	<i>Pour qu'il vienne lui dire qu'il s'en va</i>

2010:

My life is silent. When something happens in my family, whether it is good or bad, we know that it was meant to happen, that it happens for a reason. It is not a problem. It doesn't require a "What if?"

My life is silent. I come from Madagascar, the country that most people know about because of its fauna and flora. But how many of these people know that there are almost 20 million Malagasy, who are currently suffering?

On n'écrit pas la chance qu'on a
Pas de chanson d'amour quand on en a
Voilà pourquoi, mon amour
Je n'écris rien
Sur toi
Rassure-toi.

One doesn't write on their own luck
No love song when one has some

*This is why, my love
I don't write anything
On you
Don't worry.*

My voice is silent. But I am left to wonder, how did Zazie know about my silent life?
