Homesick, Jennifer Croft (2019). Charco Press: Edinburgh, pp. 219, ISBN 9781944700942 (hardcopy) $20.00.

Jennifer Croft is a talented, award-winning translator, and in *Homesick*, long-listed for the Women's Prize in Fiction 2023, she proves herself to be an equally talented writer. Croft's interest in contemporary women writers and passion to Slavic and Romance languages has led her to translate Polish, Ukrainian, and Argentine Spanish literary works by female writers. She is best known for her translation of the Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk's novels *Flights* and *The Books of Jacob*. Croft's astonishing translation of *Flights* has given Tokarczuk a formidable presence in English and paved the way for her to win the 2018 Nobel Prize for her novel. In 2018, they shared the Man Booker International Prize for Croft's translation of the novel. Earlier, Croft was longlisted for the Best Translated Book Award and the National Translation Award for her translation from Spanish of Romina Paula's *Scattered Ashes: August* (published in 2017). While her translations have demonstrated her gift as a translator, her creative memoir *Homesick*, is also a perfect demonstration of her talent as a novelist.

Homesick is a memoir not only of a journey toward self-restoration and inward repair but a reflection on the essence and beauty of language and art. In this work, Jennifer Croft endeavors in a fictionalized autobiography told in the third person to recollect fragmented memories of loyal sisterhood and life-threatening events — including neglect, illness, loss, and separation— that her protagonist, Amy, witnessed throughout her childhood and early adolescence in Oklahoma. Every chapter of this innovative and delightful book is written in short paragraphs and short present-tense sentences, but, for balance, is peppered with enigmatic color photographs (taken by Croft) of her sister, childhood, and travels that could freeze moments in time: "What she wants—what she's always wanted—is to capture and to fix forever the presence of her sister, to contain her, to never let her go, or break, or even change." (p. 237). Each photo is vividly illuminated by a stimulating caption on word etymology, words use, or translation that supplements and contextualizes the narrative, yet some of these captions could still pose a possible challenge for lay readers to decipher as they are loaded with intricacies and ambiguities.

Divided into two parts — "Sick" and "Home" — the book comprises numerous brief chapters, typically spanning two to three pages, each with sentence-length headings and telling a story often disconnected from the one before and after it. In each part, Croft offers a deep and moving contemplation on sisterhood, family, loyalty, guilt, love, emotional vulnerability,

empathy, and, most importantly, the desire of the self to retain and honor its own voice. In the first part, "Sick," which constitutes the bulk of the book, the reader journeys into Amy's living (yet camouflaged) testimonials of the pain she experienced because of her mother's neglect, and her intense guilt over the illness of her impulsive sister, Zoe. Throughout this section, she makes commentary on her own sense of self-sacrifice for the sake of the family and the strange, strong bond of sisterhood; her intellectual journey; and her first true love for Sasha — her childhood Russian and Ukrainian tutor and his dramatic loss. It is in this section that we get a rare historical insight into the thought-processes of translator: she makes reference to her obsessive relationship with words, languages, and translation, such as "Zoe doesn't listen to the words, but Amy does." (p. 49). "But do you ever wonder where words come from, Zoe? (p. 20) Or where they might be going?" (p. 23). In other sections of her work, she makes mention of the power of translation to shape, and even change perceptions of realities: "Amy understands: the world's not small, unless by small you mean infinite. Translation welcomes Amy into this infinity, and Amy feels safe and elastic." (p. 217)

She also makes reference to the trope of photography, and collections which give further valuable insights into the historicity of meaning-making for a young person 'living' her practices of translation. Little by little, however, the reader starts to notice that her cheerful spirit starts to die out, with comments such as "Amy stiffens, and then detaches from her body, watching the rest from overhead…. She thinks how Anna Karenina lay down in front of a train. How Vronsky tried to shoot himself in the heart." (p. 194-6). "As she struggles to summon any words in any language…. she starts to write about nothing." (p. 200)

The deep grief at the loss of her lover and the pain of separation from the Zoe of her childhood seems to overwhelm her with feelings of loneliness and depression. Throughout the work, however, Croft keeps on trying to make sense of her life and find a new way to organize herself. Later, a wake-up call begins to radically change her. She comes to the realization that the math of sacrifice and self-destruction "will not cancel out Sasha's death with her own, or make her sister feel good by feeling bad." (p. 211). The second part of the book, "Home," is then introduced by two photos of a girl, titled 'Amy.' This girl is screaming at the top of her lungs, an expression of liberation, captioned "But that's not what translation is" (p. 207). After these images, Croft 'shows' and 'tells' in this part how she finds the home that she has been longing for: her true Self— "a whole new person -luminous, her-self (p. 219)." She is finally at peace, "it is the only time when everything is out of her hands. There is nothing Amy has to do and

nothing that she even can. It's a carelessness that isn't careless, merely the absence of concerns." (p. 226). She enters new worlds with new languages, and her diligence to translation is acknowledged: "She skims or delves, depending. She gets grants, then awards for her work translations, and the money covers travels: the hard work, rewarding work of becoming herself. Her first assignment is Croatia." (p. 223).

The complexity of this work, and challenge to review it, lies in Croft's departure from a conventional linear structure in her memoir. The disjointed, nonlinear style of narration often presents a challenging task for anyone to make sense of the unique structure of this collection, which is, in effect, a set of very brief life stories. Croft's choice of this fragmented narrative style may reflect, or perhaps 'show' as well as 'tell' something of the nature of her traumatic memories, which are often, in nature, fragmented themselves.

Croft's meticulous attention to the shades of words and her brilliant meditations on translation are vividly present in every sentence and every caption of *Homesick*, which is why this book will hold the interest of scholars of Translation and Interpreting Studies. In some captions complementing the narrative, she traces the etymologies of particular words. Take, for instance, "Zoe comes from ancient Greek, you know, for life. And Amy is from love in Latin. In our language, which is English, both love and life go back to the same root, which signified to leave." (p. 40). She adds, "I know that astrocytes are star-shaped cells. I know the word comes from the same source as disaster." (p. 58). She also meditates on the words meaning and use within and across languages: "The journeys a word makes are not fully fathomable (a fathom was once an embrace, or the measure of an armspan), part of what sets it apart from its semantic kin, giving rise to words that look the same and come from the same home but mean completely different things now, like casualty and casualidad (which is just coincidence in Spanish)." (p. 77). It is apparent that Croft believes in the power of words to connect and bridge distances:

> Words owe their very existence to distance, although their deepest purpose is to overcome it; this is the most true for words like saudade, hiraeth, and even homesick, a word I've always loved- but never thought I felt, until today. (p. 218)

She also writes about the magnificence of connection that translation creates: "Each time a Russian word meets an English word it generates a spark." (p. 217). While contemplating the power of translation and words, she also gives writers and translators a powerful reminder that words sometimes fail us. No matter how experiences are voiced, words may have limited

ability to translate some traumatic experiences, as some are, in essence, unsayable and unspeakable, to use psychoanalyst Annie Rogers's words (2006).

Croft gently reminds us throughout her book that 'untranslatability' is not only the inability to find an equivalence in the other language, "Once in a while there is a word with no translation" (p. 130). She explains, "there is no single word in any other language that means the same thing as the Welsh hiraeth, which I'm told is a refusal to surrender what has already been lost (akin, but not identical, to homesickness)." (p. 161). It is also the inability to translate revelations and feelings into your own language. Through evocative vignettes interspersed into the prose, Croft seems to be 'showing' rather than 'telling' how she works to build a bridge to fill the unspeakable holes that the words could not. Read or 'experienced' together, the text and images of this work allow a reader to sense the full depth of the pain, recovery, and joy.

Another core concept in translation Croft refers to in the book is the notion of Foreignness. The pictures in color and black and white of travels from all over the world. The foreign words — that seem to be at odds— add some shades of foreignness or alienation instead of homogeneity. She, for example, leaves a Ukrainian folk song (p. 119) and an entire Russian poem by Yevtusshenko untranslated (p. 174-5).

In short, *Homesick* is a combination of complex bonds of sisterhood and a coming-of-age story of a translator's life. It presents a blend of both factual and fictional storytelling. Croft in *Homesick* also interrogates fundamental concepts in translation and creative writing. Her work is an inspiring achievement: a literary representation of long-lasting and multi-layered emotional trauma and the infinite paradoxes of language, translation, and art by a writer/translator. Its gripping narrative seamlessly blends prose and photography in a way that captivates the mind and the heart. It is a masterpiece of imagination and wit, indeed. This book, thus, can be of great interest to literary enthusiasts and scholars engaged in the domains of life-writing, translation studies, and trauma studies.

Reference:

Rogers, Annie (2006) *The Unsayable: The Hidden Language of Trauma,* New York: Random House.

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