

Title:

Ni allá ni acá – a short story about the Venezuela diaspora and the perennial border crossings

Proposal for a 20 mins creative piece presentation (250 words):

The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that approximately 2.7 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants have crossed the borders into Latin America and the Caribbean – that number goes up to 3.4 million across the world (2019). The extended humanitarian crisis in Venezuela has mobilised a nation not used to emigrating. As a Venezuelan migrant and writer, I explore what it means to constantly cross borders for Venezuelans in *Ni Allá Ni Acá*, a short story. In this piece, I examine the meaning of borders for Venezuelan migrants and refugees through a myriad of experiences and voices. As a blend of fiction and nonfiction, personal and impersonal, this storytelling exercise understands the relationship between borders and diaspora as an expansion of the physical, reaching out to the ideological, emotional and narrative borders that enact this massive movement of Venezuelans and impregnate their refugees' and migrants' welcome in the host countries. I use creative writing and the short story form as my form of protest and as an attempt to highlight the cultural, familial and emotional erosion of a nation beyond click-bait headlines and soundbites of detached politicians. What is the story behind the fluctuating media interest? What motivates Venezuelans to leave? What happens to those who stay? Who are the people navigating these border crossings? What are those borders and how do they cross them? I aim to read the short story in this presentation and let it stand on its own without further explanation – creative practice: an attempt to hold all.

Keywords:

Venezuela, Venezuelan Diaspora, Venezuelan Refugees, Venezuelan Migration, Border Crossings, Short Story, Creative Writing, Creative Practice

Ni allá Ni acá

Part I – *Aguantar* (To endure)

Clad in two layers of socks and stuffed into plastic sandals, the old man's feet rest on the footrest of his wheelchair. Across from him, on the other side of the tin-roof shelter, the girl is **transfixed**. Her eyes run through the creases of the old man's sandals, caressing the clean plastic, surprised not to find pebbles to unpick. She attempts to slide them off his feet with her mind. They don't budge. Maybe I can give him mine, she thinks, offer his as a gift for *mamá* whose sandals, just like the girls', have long given way to the pavement.

The small loaf of bread on her hand has been getting a little sweaty. Her stomach is hollow; her breath draws its shape inside of her every other second. Still, she wants to pace herself. She wants to wait. She repeats to *mamá* that everything is ok. The milky coffee on her other hand trembles a little, ripples expanding on its surface. Around her, people move about, coming in and out, laying down to rest wherever they find an empty **space**.

Twelve, the girl thinks as she notices a young man crying to himself against one of the shelter's walls. Someone puts a hand on his shoulder and squeezes without looking at the young man's face, knowing without asking what there is to cry about. Twelve, she counts, the number of young men she has seen cry in the open so far – twelve. Her brother once swore on her *abuela's* life that he had never shed a single tear, not even when he was born. She's counting for him. Counting to tell him that it does happen, that she has seen it. She'll tell him once they meet again in Perú. She stopped asking where Perú is two days ago when *mamá* grabbed her hand and walked with her in silence, keeping close to the trail of people weaving up the mountains. When they stopped for the night, *mamá* sat her down on the side of the road and hugged her for what felt like hours, trembling like *abuela* **does**.

She takes a small bite of the bread, dry and delicious, and she washes it down with the lukewarm coffee. The old man has noticed her and is drawing shapes with the shadows of his hands on the redbrick wall of the shelter. She smiles when she recognises a bunny.

People file in as the rain picks up outside. A woman with a baby tied to her back and two children flanking her sides rushes over to the girl, knocking without noticing the old man's shadow bunny. They stop in front of the girl, droplets mark their spot on the cement. A fat raindrop falls on the girl's toe. She brushes it off and the movement loosens the strap from the sole of her sandal. The girl bends down to cover her foot, but *mamá* has seen what happened and comes **over**.

"Are you alright, *mi amor*? You still haven't finished your meal?"

The girl nods as *mamá* pries her fingers off her toes and wriggles the strap back into the sandal. It comes loose once more, the hole too wide to hold the strap in place. *Mamá* sucks in her teeth and the deep crease between her eyebrows returns.

"Nayiber?" asks the woman with the baby. *Mamá* stands up and looks at her. She gasps and embraces the woman. They cry a little as people do when they meet on the road and then they laugh, as people do after they've cried enough.

The girl watches them talk. She notices the woman's son, a small boy, looking at her.

"*Amiga*, where are you heading? I thought I heard you'd move to Caracas," *mamá* says.

The girl breaks the remaining bread in two. She soaks it into the milky coffee.

"*Si amiga*, we did. Two months we were there. Money stopped being enough to eat. My sister in Medellín has been helping us. We're headed there."

The girl puts a piece of bread on the boy's hand. He moves his hand behind his mother's legs and gives it to his sister. The girl gives the boy the other piece of bread. It disappears into his mouth. He chokes a little. She pats his back like she has seen *mamá* do and gives him the last sip of coffee.

He drinks it and brushes his tongue with the palm of his hand afterwards, to remove the bitterness of the **taste**.

“To Lima, *amiga*,” *mamá* says. “We got the bus to San Cristóbal, *abuela* helped us pay for it. The idea is to keep moving, keep going far. If they let us through,” *mamá*’s voice trembles and the woman hugs her again.

The girl feels a stab of pain in her lower belly. It pulses for a second, threatening to widen like lighting. Not the dull soreness of hunger she knows well. Nor the expanding emptiness it brings. No, something else.

Mamá has remembered her sandal and bends down to check on it. She takes the girl’s hand to lift her up. An instinct tells the girl to remain seated. She has felt something slide out of her, a thick drop, warm like fever. She knows. She’s been told to wait for this. She knows her dress must be wet, stained. *Mamá* lifts her up and the girl slides a defensive hand behind her. Seeing the gesture, *mamá* stops and stares at her. She too knows, a gesture too familiar to mistake. She exchanges a quick glance with her friend. The three of them know something together. The girl blushes deeply, afraid of anyone else knowing this about her from a just glance. *Mamá* picks her up and manoeuvres the sandal to cover her. “My girl no longer,” she whispers and kisses her as she takes her away.

Sra Anna, the Colombian lady that runs the shelter out of her own backyard, breaks her rules for the first time this month and lets them both in her **house**. The girl gets a shower, a new set of clothes and the toolkit for being a woman. Sra Anna hugs her and says a prayer for them both. *Mamá* cries openly, too grateful to be ashamed of the woman’s charity.

Over the next week, **on the road**, the girl hears all about what it means to be a **woman**. Over the next month, they share a tent in a town square, deep in the Colombian rainforest.

Part II – *Apoyar* (To support)

Matilda's and Ben's collection of friends perch around the table. Anna, their one-year old, presides over us from her high chair. A sample of our dinner is splattered across her face. Everyone makes an effort to clear the plates as Ben disappears to fetch our **pudding**. Once there's nothing else I can do to help, I slide my hand into my pocket and retrieve my phone, warm and almost out of battery.

"Any news?" Charlie asks. She leans a little closer to notice the latest count. One hundred and ninety six WhatsApp messages in the last two hours.

I unlock the phone and find mom's chat. Last seen online on last Friday at 3 pm. Four days ago. I check *Siempre Juntos*, our family's group chat. No news from her there either. I lock the screen and put the phone face down on the table. Charlie kisses the side of my head and whispers, "I know she's alright. You'd have learned by now if not." I nod at this statement for the tenth time. Charlie pours more wine into my glass. I grab her hand under the table.

Matilda has been watching our interaction. "What's going on, loves?"

"Nothing." Everything. I smile and shake my head. I don't want to get into this here. Not today, not with her friends.

Ben delivers a passable attempt at a cake. I finish the wine by the time my portion reaches me. I lift the fresh sprig of lavender that decorates it and fill my lungs with its scent. I don't feel I can eat this cake.

Ben's brother Jack raises his voice as he opens the conversation he's been having to the rest of the table. "Isn't it so, now? If things have gone as I said, we wouldn't be stuck in this mess. Three years now. I can't even stand that word anymore."

"What, Brexit?" Charlie prods him.

"Argh! Quiet now, I swear." He downs his pint.

I attempt a bite at the cake, willing to disappear in my concentration.

“**You there.** What was your name again?” Jack says.

Matilda shares her best pronunciation of it. I love that she made the effort to learn it.

“Ah, nah. I’m not even going to try that. You’re from that place, aren’t you? The one in the news? VenezuEILA.”

I sigh as tiny as I can help it and nod.

“VenezuEILA,” he repeats, **straightening himself**. “That’s right. Exotic, isn’t it? An exotic VenezuEILIAN woman.”

I don’t bother to smile this time. Charlie puts her arm around me.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” Matilda says. “I heard a podcast about medicine shortages. You still have family there, right? Are they ok?”

“Matilda, darling, don’t believe everything you hear,” Jack says. People around the table stop to look at me.

“It’s a hard time,” is all I say. All I want to say. “My Grandparents, aunts and uncles, mom and dad are still there. Oh, and one cousin. We’ve found a way to get the medicines with Venezuelan prescriptions in Belgium. A friend is taking them there now. We’re fortunate that we can still do **this**. That we can do it at all.”

She comes over and gives me a kiss. She picks up our plates and heads to the kitchen.

“**VenezuEILA** has one of the strongest social security systems in Latin America,” Jack says. “There are medicines. You’re just falling prey to the sob story.”

Charlie leans over and whispers that we can leave at any time.

“Do you think the news are accurate?” Ben asks.

“They’ve been getting better. I doubt we see all that’s going on,” I say.

“But what is going on?” Matilda’s co-worker asks me. She seems genuine and I am half-tempted to answer.

“It is complex. There’s been years of medicine, food, electricity and **water** shortages. Ten million percent inflation. Diseases that were eradicated in the 80s are coming back. I think the number of Venezuelans displaced has reached 4 million.”

My phone vibrates, a call, and as I grab it, it slides out of my hand and lands on the floor. It trembles as if trying to get away from me. One missed call from my uncle by the time I get a hold of it. I excuse myself and spend the next five minutes trying to get a hold of him. No chance. By the time I am back, Jack is high on his soapbox about Allende, US invasions and coups d’etats. I walk in to his “It’s all a strategy for regime change” schpiel.

“Is that really true?” the woman from earlier asks me.

“The politics depend on which Venezuelan you ask,” I say. “The crisis, though, is undeniable. It has been going on for years. An illegitimate government holds on to every institution at any cost. Disappeared people, mounting allegations of torture. The military controls food supply and yet on average Venezuelans have lost 7 kilos. The government admits child mortality has grown over 30%. It is bad, it is unsustainable.”

“Oh, come on. You cannot be that naïve.”

“Time to go,” I say to Charlie. Jack hisses – his attempt to undermine not what I have said, he’s beyond that now, but me. Only comfortable when right, when superior, when uncontested. The mechanics of this stale, cult-like, unoriginal.

Charlie gets up and we say our goodbyes. As I slid my boot on and Charlie opens the door, I hear Jack scream, “Viva la **Revolución!**”

At 3 am that night, I give in and declare the Night Time Tea a fraud. Its bitter aftertaste still lingers. I've checked in on mum again, tried in vain to call her, left her voice notes that will remain unheard for who knows how long. I've gotten myself up to date with all the WhatsApp messages and I'm scrolling to see if I can find a sibling or a cousin awake. The benefits of being spread out across the world. I see my sister is online. I brush Charlie's hair as I type what happened tonight.

"Great one to add to the collection," she says, accompanied by crying, laughing emojis. "You seem to have a knack to find them."

That I do, I think.

"You have to see this. It's hard. But you have to see it." She sends me a video where a famous Venezuelan comedian and a former newscaster have gone to the border in Colombia to see what's going on. Charlie is asleep, so I put my headphones on and let myself cry as I watch it. They ask a young woman with a young child where is she heading. "And now?" the comedian asks. "Now we walk. The idea is to walk. To move as far as we can. Let's see if they let us through." They're heading for Perú, over three thousand miles away. The newscaster kneels by the girl and notices her broken sandal. Together, they find a way to repair it.

Part III – *Esperar* (To wait)

On the third day of the black out, she awakes long before the day is ready. She doesn't stir, she stays in bed. She can see a few stars still clinging on to the sky through the bars of her bedroom **window**. The only light illuminating Caracas, she thinks as she brushes her hair with her fingertips across her pillow. As she waits for the sun, she tracks an imaginary map of the world on the wooden ceiling. In Europe, she dots a couple of spots where she imagines her children, one by one, their different countries, their similar lives. Arms that haven't wrapped around her in months, laughter she only hears chopped off in their futile attempts at FaceTiming each other, lives she is no longer **witnessing**.

She thinks of the rooms empty in her house that once held an entire family. She fills them now with imagined journeys she's having with them and the rooms make space to hold her dreams by pushing the memories that usually fill them. Migrant children, orphaned **parents**. A warm, heavy ball forms just beneath her ribs as she thinks that she needs them away, she needs their help. A professional life stunted by forced three-day working weeks and below-living wages. The threat of having to emigrate at 70. The guilt of being dependant prickles her skin, taunted by the blush of her humiliation. A full working life, none of that effort counting. One day, which feels it is getting increasingly sooner, she will have to **leave**. One day, she will have to lock her house and leave it to the dust and to the dull promise of coming back when things get **better**. In the hollow bones of an empty family house, in her internet, water and electricity free island, she, as everyone else, is **waiting**.

In the afternoon, those still here come to check on her. They run through the checklist as if they don't already know the answers: who has water, who has electricity, who has spoken to their kids abroad. They still poke the switches and check the faucets, the nervous validation an unmovable truth, of winning time to **digest it**.

The baby, the only of its generation born here, provides them with something they still haven't found a way to regulate, to administer, to control. Relief, joy, hope. She wins them over in a flash of a mischievous smile. With her around, there is no shortage.

They show her their phones, proving to her that her kids have been *pendiente*. That they have checked on her. She's known this, but their photos and messages still fill **her**. When they all go home, well before it's dark, she sits on a bench overlooking the mountains that wrap around the **city**. She thinks of the woman from her office. She's heard she's gone, taken her boy, the little girl and the baby and left for Medellín. **She** imagines the baby on the woman's back as she walks up the mountains. She sends them a blessing.

(Total mins: 19:59.34 mins in first reading)

(Total mins: 20:08.01 mins in second reading)

(Total mins: 18:45.22 mins in third reading)