Mañana nunca lo hablamos
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Halfon's book is a powerful evocation of a young boy's childhood in 1970s Guatemala, disrupted by the increasingly violent guerrilla and army attacks in Guatemala City that led to the arrival of a military junta in 1982 and the flight of the narrator's (and author's) family in 1981 to the United States.

Based in large part on the author's life, each chapter tells of a certain episode in the narrator's childhood, frequently using a physical sensation as the axis around which the memory revolves and revealing in the process heartrending glimpses of the country's descent into the third phase of its long-running civil war. This device gives a powerful sense of the larger-than-life feelings of childhood, as well as providing snapshot-like images of the atrocities committed in the country at the time, although these are never fully understood or explained by the young narrator. The device is powerful because this is precisely how memory works, and how our memory of childhood in particular is (re)-constructed: recollections come in no particular order, jumping from one month or year to another, and are connected to strong sensations – hunger, pain, embarrassment, pleasure – without necessarily ever being fully comprehended.

The book is heavy with sensory description (family maid Pía's thick black plait, which the narrator used to hold on to as if it were her hand; him and his brother drawing in the fine layer of dust left on the floor after the earthquake of 1976), and is divided into sections presented as separate stories but which, despite the gaps in time implicit between them, can be read as parts of a fragmented whole.

The first story opens with a stark, earthy description of the ground and the child's contact with it as he holds his father's hand on a beach. Confused as his father tells him how he once drowned in the sea in front of them, the boy feels something in his gut, which 'now, today, I would describe as fear.' The final phrase of the story – 'For a while afterwards I could still feel the sway of the sea against my legs' – eloquently suggests the power of his father's tale of near-death maintaining its troubling yet indefinable grip on his imagination, and these uneasy bodily sensations set the tone for a book filled with physical sensations around which memories spin.

All the book's other episodes are similarly quietly affecting, including the boy's experience of going into hospital and overhearing the doctors argue with his parents about whether or not he might have cancer, as he watches doctors, nurses and two soldiers with big black rifles walk up and down the corridor outside his room; and an episode in a restaurant when a woman in a red overcoat is pointed out by his father as being one of the guerrillas who kidnapped his own father in the sixties. The boy notices the woman, how she appears to float over to her table, and thinks about how she doesn't fit his mental picture of a guerrilla, but his observation is given no more weight than that

of the hard, greasy garlic bread from which he takes a too-large bite. The child's vague and incomplete vision of the brutal adult world around him is thus neatly depicted.

The Virginia Woolf quote used as an epigraph - 'That great Cathedral space which was childhood' – illustrates well the book's capacity to capture the enormity of childhood events and the effect they have on our lives, and yet also the cavernous spaces between them. Halfon's decision to write a non-linear depiction of childhood, with disparate moments spread over a four- or five-year period and linked only by the vivid sensory sparks that seem to vibrate at their centre, echoes the way our memory of childhood functions, with no real sense of time passing in a straight line but rather of significant moments that stand out in our minds due to a physical or emotional sensation.

The book manages to somehow be methodical, neat and well-structured, yet messy, beautiful and with tantalising gaps at the same time. It gives a glimpse of Guatemala in turmoil, which will be interesting to many English readers as the country is relatively little-known over here, but deftly revealed through a child's eyes, and is more the story of a childhood than that of a country entrenched in civil war, and as such would have universal appeal, I think. Each story works well on its own and in translation would be ideal to pitch to a magazine, but the book works best as a whole.

A truly stunning work with a beautiful stillness to it, very few potential translation issues, and which deserves to be in as many languages as possible.

Summary of the report by Rosalind Harvey