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THE PARROT'S PERCH

A Memoir

Karen Keilt

She Writes Press (256 pp.)

ISBN: 978-1-63152-571-1; April 16, 2019

BOOK REVIEW

A Brazilian-born writer recalls her unlawful incarceration in this debut memoir.

Born and raised in São Paulo, Keilt had a privileged childhood. Her family had “maids, cooks, nannies, chauffeurs,” and by the age of 5, she had “more international travel stamps” on her “passport than many people get in a lifetime.” But there was always an air of mystery surrounding her father’s profession. Given his volatility, the author knew better than to ask questions, but she recalls being picked up from school and finding the unmoving body of a young man slumped in the back of her father’s car. Keilt’s paternal grandfather was from Baltimore, and she recounts that her father was schooled in Annapolis before being recruited for military intelligence, although the exact details of his job were unclear. In 1976, four men invaded the author’s home and forcibly took her and her American husband to a São Paulo police station on suspicion of cocaine trafficking. There, they were held in a “dungeon” for 45 days and endured brutal beatings and torture involving electricity. Keilt recalls that she was repeatedly raped. After their release, she was left to wonder if the incident was connected to her brother-in-law’s suspected role in drug trafficking or her father’s veiled activities. The memoir opens in 2013, with the author preparing to testify to the Brazilian National Truth Commission at the United Nations headquarters in New York. Keilt’s writing avoids unnecessary adornment, articulating her harrowing ordeal with clarity and poise: “I’m not anything, just numb, a shadow of the vibrant young woman I used to be, nodding in and out of consciousness, my pants wet with my own urine, my spirit broken.” Her sentences are jabbing and capture the dire urgency of the moment. There is the rare occasion when she repeats herself, although this may be for emphasis: “We whisper together running over and over all the possible reasons we had ended up there. We whisper on and on about all the possibilities.” In writing this courageous, grueling memoir, the author has made an important and powerful statement regarding human rights violations. Her recollections will undoubtedly leave a mark on readers, perhaps never more so than when she was reluctantly sworn to silence by her mother to protect her father and the family name.

An astoundingly brave and lucid gathering of horrific memories.

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