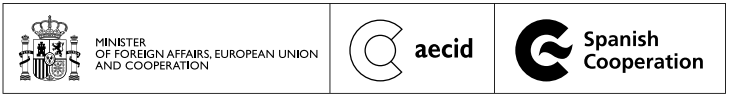
10 OF 30

New Spanish
Narrative
2020



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10 OF 30

New Spanish
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2020

10 of 30 is a project sponsored by the Office of Cultural and Scientific Relations at the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID). The project aims to bring international exposure to Spanish writers between the ages of 30 and 40, a period when a writer's work often shows early maturity. Spanish readers have recognized the talent of these authors, and the quality of their work invites support for their translation into other languages.

The first edition of **10 of 30: New Spanish Narrative** was distributed in 2019. An additional ten authors have been selected for 2020, and the project will culminate in 2021 with a third edition: thirty writers, representative of their generation, who will form part of the programming Spain will bring to Frankfurt 2021 as the Guest of Honor. The three editions of **10 of 30** represent a key initiative whose purpose is to raise awareness about these young writers, and reach foreign editors who will have the opportunity to read their early work.

This year, the Office of Cultural and Scientific Relations brought together a jury of five authors: José Ovejero, Clara Obligado, Nuria Barrios, Marcos Giralt Torrente, and Javier Serena. The writers selected for 2020 are: Irene Vallejo, Florencia del Campo, Sabina Urraca, Álex Chico,

Juan Gómez Bárcena, Aixa de la Cruz, Cristian Crusat, Jordi Nopca, Katixa Agirre, and Gabriela Ybarra. Each have published at least one published book of prose and were born between 1979-1988.

10 of 30: New Spanish Narrative includes an excerpt from each author's work, as well as a short interview, biography, and overview of their literary career. The publication of the excerpts in both English and Spanish was conceived as a means for sharing the writers' work: foreign literary agents and editors will receive a copy of this book via various Spanish cultural institutions and other public organizations abroad, as well as information about financial support available for translations.

Additionally, the ten writers selected for **10 of 30** will participate in literary activities and give workshops in AECID's cultural centers in Latin America, with the aim of facilitating knowledge and relationships among writers working in the same language from other countries in the Americas.

AECID looks forward to presenting these writers as part of Spain's participation as Guest of Honor at Frankfurt 2021. We believe **10 of 30** will prove to represent some of the most interesting voices to emerge in our country in recent years, and whose books merit reading in other languages as well.

Miguel Albero Suárez

Irene Vallejo

Zaragoza, 1979

One night, from the edge of my bed, my father told me about Ulysses meeting the Sirens, and that's where it all began. Drawn to the luminous Mediterranean world since childhood, I had the eccentric idea of studying Classical Languages. I earned my European Doctorate in 2007 from the Universities of Zaragoza and Florence, where I lived for a time caressing ancient manuscripts and perusing libraries hundreds of years old. That was the beginning of *El infinito en un junco / Infinite in a reed* (Siruela 2019), a literary essay that has received an unimaginable and warm reception from readers and critics, reaching twelve editions. The book won 'El Ojo Crítico' Prize for Narrative and the 'Las librerías recomiendan' Award, and has been sold to thirty countries, where it will soon be published. I'm a regular columnist for *El País* and *Heraldo de Aragón*, and some of my articles have appeared in foreign media such as *El Corriere della Sera*. Those press articles have been collected in *El pasado que te espera* (Anorak 2010), *Alguien habló de nosotros* (Contraseña 2017) and *El futuro recordado* (Contraseña 2020) and feature a hybrid of journalism, fiction, and philosophy. I have written two novels: *La luz sepultada* (Paréntesis 2011) and *El silbido del arquero* (Contraseña 2015). I work with the *Believe in art* project, which introduces art and literature in childrens' hospitals through murals, activities, and storytellers. I have also embarked on two children's books: *El inventor de viajes* (2014) and *La leyenda de las mareas mansas* (2015). Today, seated at the edge of another small bed, I tell mythical stories to a little child. And there, once again, is where it all begins.

When and why did you start writing?

My grandmother used to say to me: "Study, child, because you're no good for anything else." She was right, I write because I'm worse at everything else and nothing makes me as happy. The poison of words invaded me early on. My family still remembers that, as a child, I always begged the adults to "tell me a story." Insatiable, I started to make up my own stories joyfully, instinctively, like just another game. Whenever I read a book, I didn't dream of being the heroine: I wanted to be the author.

What themes are you concerned with?

I'm interested in the fears that bind us from inside ourselves, strangeness, loneliness, shock, the ancient, symbolic worlds that illuminate our present, foreignness and emigration in all their literary and symbolic senses.

Who are some of your favorite writers and influences?

My nightstand—perpetually under siege by stocks of books—is promiscuous, it blushes and transforms often. My most lasting loyalty has been to my Latin classics: Homer, Sappho, Herodotus, Euripides, Tucidides, Virgil, Ovid, Tacitus, Luciano. And Montaigne and Sterne.

As a fiction writer, what are some trends you have seen in recently published books? Which ones do you find most interesting?

I'm interested in the freedom that the essay genre is finding to embrace all registers, through new ways of dialoguing with the past. I'm fascinated by borderline genres, texts that resist classification, migrant voices.

If you could have been a writer in another place and time, when and where would you choose?

I wouldn't want to have been born at any point before anesthesia was invented. Given the challenges and the oblivion suffered by female writers for all of memory, I choose here and now. The books I write are children of this era, and to a certain point, antidotes to it.

Are you currently working on any new projects? If so, what are they?

I'm researching my next two books, an essay and a novel. Both take on, with different approaches and language, the same problems: memory, the intimate experience in big historical changes.

SYNOPSIS

This is a book about the history of books. A voyage through the life of this fascinating artifact invented so that words could travel in space and time. The story of how they were made, of all the types we have tested over the course of almost thirty centuries: books of smoke, stone, clay, reeds, silk, leather, trees, and the newest arrivals, plastic and light.

It is, moreover, a book of journeys. A route with stops at the battlefields of Alexander the Great and the Villa de los Papiros beneath the eruptions of Mount Vesuvius, at Cleopatra's palaces and the scene of Hypathia's crime, in the first known bookstores and the workshops of manuscript copyists, in the bonfires where forbidden codices burned, in the gulag, the library of Sarajevo and the underground maze in Oxford in the year 2000. A thread that ties the classics to the dizzying present, connecting them with current debate: Aristophanes and the trials against humorists, Sappho and the literary voice of women, Tito Livio and the fan phenomenon, Seneca and post-truth.

But above all, this is a marvelous, collective adventure starring thousands who, over the course of time, have made books possible, and protected them: oral narrators, scribes, illuminators, translators, traveling vendors, teachers, wisemen, spies, rebels, nuns, slaves, explorers. Readers in mountainous landscapes and beside the roaring sea, in the capitals where energy is concentrated and the furthest reaches where knowledge finds refuge in chaotic times. Regular people whose names seldom appear in history, those saviors of books are the real protagonists of this essay.

EL INFINITO EN UN JUNCO

(From *El infinito en un junco* / Infinity in a Reed)

Mysterious groups of men rove the roads of Greece. The peasants watch them with mistrust from their fields or the entrances to their huts. Experience has taught them that only dangerous people travel: soldiers, mercenaries, slave traders. They frown and mutter until they see them sink back down over the horizon. They do not like armed strangers.

The men on horseback ride on, taking no notice of the villagers. For months they have climbed mountains, crossed ravines, passed through valleys, forded rivers, sailed from island to island. To complete their task, they must venture through the violent territories of a world almost perpetually at war. They are hunters in search of a very special kind of prey. Silent, cunning prey that leaves neither trace nor trail.

If these unsettling emissaries were to sit down in some port tavern to eat grilled octopus, talk, and get drunk with strangers (which they never do for the sake of prudence), they could tell great tales of travel. They have gone deep into lands wracked with the plague. They have passed through regions devastated by fire, they have witnessed the hot ash of destruction. They have had to drink filthy water that gave them monstrous diarrhea. Whenever it rains, the carts and mules get stuck in the puddles;

amid shouts and curses they have pulled them until they fell to their knees and kissed the mud. When night catches them far from shelter, only their capes protect them from the scorpions. They know the maddening storm of lice and the constant fear of highwaymen infesting the roads. Many times, while riding through immense solitude, their blood has run cold imagining a group of bandits awaiting them, holding their breath, hidden around some bend in the road, ready to fall upon them and murder them in cold blood, steal their bags and abandon their still-warm bodies in the brush.

It's logical for them to be afraid. The king of Egypt entrusted them with great sums of money before sending them across the sea to carry out his orders. In that time, just a few decades after Alexander's death, to travel with a large fortune was very risky, almost suicidal. And although thieves, contagious diseases, and shipwrecks threaten to make such an expensive mission fail, the pharaoh insists on sending his agents out from the land of the Nile in all directions, to cross borders and travel great distances. He passionately desires—impatiently and with a painful thirst for possession—the prey his secret hunters track for him, confronting unknown dangers.

The peasants that sit and gossip at the door to their huts, the mercenaries and bandits, would have opened their eyes wide in shock and their mouths agape with incredulity had they known what the foreign riders were pursuing.

Books. They were searching for books.

It was the best kept secret of the Egyptian court. The Lord of the Two Lands, one of the world's most powerful men at the time, would sacrifice life itself (other peoples' lives, naturally; it is always like that with kings) to acquire all the world's books for his Great Library of Alexandria. He was chasing the dream of an absolute and perfect library, the collection that would bring together all the works of all writers since the beginning of time.

I'm always scared of writing the first lines, of crossing the threshold of a new book. When I have been through all the libraries, when my notebooks are bursting with feverish notes, when I'm out of reasonable—or even crazy—excuses to justify waiting, I'll procrastinate a few days, during which time I realize what it means to be a coward. To put it simply, I don't feel capable. Everything should be there—the tone, the sense of humor, the poetry, the rhythm, the promises. The still unwritten chapters should already be perceptible, fighting to be born in the seedbeds of the words chosen to begin. But, how to go about it? I'm burdened by doubt. With each new book, I go back to square one with the same racing heart just as with all the other first times. To write is the attempt to discover what we would write if we wrote. That's how Marguerite Duras puts it, moving from the infinitive to the conditional and then to the subjunctive, as if she felt the ground cracking open under her feet. In the end, it isn't that different from all the other things we start doing before we know how to do them: speak a foreign language, drive, be a mother. Live.

After all the agony of doubt, after running out of postponements and alibis, I face the solitude of a blank page one hot July afternoon. I've decided to open my text with the image of mysterious hunters stalking their prey. I identify with them, I like their patience, their stoicism, their futile efforts, the slowness and the rush of the search. For years I have worked as a researcher, consulting sources, documenting evidence and trying to learn the historical material. But when the moment of truth arrives, the real, documented history I have discovered seems so astonishing that it invades my dreams and takes on, without me wanting it to, the shape of a story. I feel the urge to be inside the skin of the book hunters on the roads of a violent, convulsive, ancient Europe. And what if I start by telling of their journey? It could work, but how to keep the underlying skeleton of the facts distinct from the muscle and blood of the imagination?

I believe this starting point is just as fantastic a journey as the search for King Solomon's Mines or the Lost Ark. And yet, documents offer proof that all of this really existed in the megalomaniac mind of Egyptian kings. Perhaps back in the third century B.C.E., was the one and only occasion that the dream of gathering all the world's books—without exception—into a universal library could be realized. Today, it seems like the plot of a fascinating, abstract Borges story—or perhaps his insatiable erotic fantasy.

At the time of the great Alexandrian project, there was no such thing as the international book trade. Books could be bought in cities with a long cultural history, but not in young Alexandria. Sources tell us that the kings used the enormous advantage of absolute power to enrich their collection. What could not be bought was confiscated. If a few throats had to be slit or crops trampled in order to obtain a coveted book, they would give the order to do so, telling themselves that Egypt's splendor was far more important than trifling scruples.

Deceit, naturally, was part of their repertoire. Ptolemy III coveted the official versions of the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides that had been preserved in the archives in Athens since their premiere in the theater festivals. The pharaoh's emissaries requested to borrow the valuable papyrus scrolls to commission copies from their meticulous scribes. The Athenian city fathers demanded the exorbitant sum of fifteen silver talents as collateral, the equivalent of millions of dollars today. The Egyptians paid, expressed their gratitude with pompous bows; swore solemnly to return the loan before, say, twelve moons had passed; threatened themselves with curses if the books were not returned in perfect condition; and then, of course, kept the books and forfeited their deposit. The Athenian city fathers had no choice but to accept the affront. The once-proud capital of Pericles's day had become a provincial city in

a kingdom unable to compete with the power of Egypt, which dominated the grain trade, the petroleum of the time.

Alexandria was Egypt's principal port and new hub. Economic powers of such magnitude have never had trouble flouting the rules. Every single ship—regardless of where it sailed from—that docked at the city of the library was forced to submit to an immediate search. Customs officials confiscated any writing found on board, made copies on new papyrus sheets, returned the copies and kept the originals. These pillaged books wound up on the Library shelves with a brief note stating their origin ("ship's inventory").

When you are on top of the world, you can never ask too much. It was said that Ptolemy II sent messengers to the sovereigns and governors of every country on Earth. By sealed letter, he would ask them to take the trouble to send him, quite simply, everything for his collection: the works of their kingdom's poets and prose writers, orators and philosophers, physicians and oracles, historians and all the rest.

In addition—and this was my opening into this story—the kings sent emissaries to roam the dangerous roads and seas the known world over, with full purses and orders to purchase as many books as possible, and to locate the oldest copies, wherever they might be found. This hunger for books, and the price they were willing to pay for them, attracted rogues and forgers. They offered counterfeit scrolls of valuable texts, aging the papyrus, combining several works to pad the size of the scroll, and devising all sorts of clever manipulations. One sage with a sense of humor amused himself by coming up with phony texts, authentic fabrications designed to entice the Ptolemys in their greed. The titles were amusing, easily marketable today; for example: "What Thucydides Didn't Say." If we were to substitute the names Kafka or Joyce for Thucydides, we might imagine the excitement this swindler would cause when he

appeared at the Library with the writer's fake memoirs and undisclosed secrets under his arm.

In spite of their caution against being duped, the Library's purchasers feared rejecting a book that might turn out to be valuable, risking the pharaoh's fury in doing so. The king often inspected his collection of scrolls, as proudly as if he were overseeing a military parade. He asked Demetrius of Phalerum, charged with organizing the books in the Library, how many texts they possessed at the time. Demetrius reported the number at present: "There are now more than twenty tens of thousands, oh King; and I shall endeavour to acquire forthwith what remains in order to complete five hundred thousand." The desire for books unleashed in Alexandria was beginning to manifest as an outbreak of impassioned insanity.

I was born in a country and a time when books are easily obtained. In my house, they surface all over the place. During intense periods of work, when I request dozens of them from the various libraries that tolerate my forays, I tend to let them stack into towers on chairs or even the floor. Open upside down, too, like pitched roofs in need of a house to shelter. Now, in order to prevent my two-year-old son from crumpling the pages, I pile them up on the back of the couch, and when I sit to relax, their corners poke the nape of my neck. Considering the price of rent where I live, it turns out my books are rather costly tenants. But I believe that all of them—from the enormous photography books to those old glue-bound paperbacks that invariably close up like mussel shells—make my home a cozier place.

The tale of the efforts, journeys, and hardships faced to fill the shelves of Alexandria's library could appear to be compelling simply for its exoticism. They are strange events—adventures, like the fantastic voyages to the Indias in search of spices. Books are so commonplace nowadays, stripped of an aura of technological innovation, that prophets predicting

their disappearance abound. Every once in a while, I read with dismay newspaper articles that proclaim that extinction is nigh for books, replaced by electronic devices, defeated by the huge range of leisure opportunities. The worst harbingers claim that we are on the edge of the end of an era, a veritable apocalypse of closed bookstores and empty libraries. They seem to insinuate that books are on the verge of turning into exhibits in museums of ethnology, alongside arrowheads from prehistoric spears. With these ideas rooted in my imagination, I look over my own unending rows of books and lines of vinyl records, wondering if a cherished old world is about to disappear.

Are we sure?

The book has withstood the test of time, proven it can go the distance. Every time we have woken from our dreams of revolution or the nightmares of our human catastrophes, books have still remained. As Umberto Eco said, the book belongs in the same category as the spoon, the hammer, the wheel, and scissors. Once invented, nothing could do better.

Of course, technology is dazzling and strong enough to overthrow ancient monarchies. And yet, we all yearn for things we have lost—photographs, files, old jobs, memories—for the speed with which they age and become obsolete. First went the songs from our cassette tapes, then the movies we recorded on VHS. We make sometimes frustrating efforts to collect what technology insists in putting out of style. When the DVD came on the scene, we told ourselves that our filing problems were solved for good, but they came back with new, even smaller disks, which invariably required us to purchase new devices. What is strange is that we can still read a manuscript that was painstakingly copied over ten centuries ago, but we can no longer watch a videotape or use a floppy disk from only a few years ago. Unless we keep all of our old computers and playing devices, like a museum of expiration, in our storage rooms.

We mustn't forget that for many centuries the book has been our ally in a war that doesn't appear in history books. The fight to preserve our valuable creations. Words, which are hardly a puff of air. The fictions we create to make sense of chaos and survive within it. Knowledge—true, false, always provisional—that we scratch into the hard stone of our ignorance.

That's why I decided to submerge myself in this exploration. In the beginning, there were questions, swarms of them: When did the birth of the book take place? What's the secret history of the attempts to reproduce or annihilate them? What was lost along the way? What was saved? Why have some of them become classics? How many casualties have resulted from the teeth of time, the nails of fire, the poison of water? Which books were burned in fury, which most passionately copied? Were they the same?

This story is an attempt to carry on the adventure of those book hunters. I would like to be, somehow, their unlikely travel companion, on the trail of lost manuscripts, unknown histories, and voices on the verge of being silenced. Perhaps those groups of explorers were nothing more than henchmen in the service of kings possessed by megalomaniacal obsession. Perhaps they didn't understand the transcendence of their task, which seemed absurd to them, and during the nights under the open sky, when they smothered the coals from their campfire, they muttered through gritted teeth that they were tired of risking their lives for a madman's dream. Surely, they would've preferred to be sent on a mission with more possibilities for advancement, such as stamping out a rebellion in the Nubian deserts or inspecting the cargo of barges on the Nile. But I suspect that in searching for traces of all books as if they were pieces of scattered treasure, they were laying—without knowing it—the foundation of our world.

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You, reader, lived for a time in an oral world. From your earliest babbling until you learned to read, words only existed through the voice. You found the mute sketches of letters everywhere, but they were meaningless. Adults controlled the world, they could read and write. You didn't quite understand what this was nor did it matter much to you because speaking was enough. The first stories in your life entered through the shells of your ears, your eyes didn't know how to listen yet. Then came school: straight lines, circles, letters, syllables. The same step humanity took from orality to writing occurred—on a small scale—within you.

My mother sat on the edge of my bed and read to me every night. She was the rhapsodist, and I the rapt audience. The time, the place, the gestures and silences were always the same: our personal liturgy. As her eyes sought the passage she'd left off from the night before and went back a few sentences to take up the thread of the story, the soft breeze of the tale carried away all the day's worries and intuited fears of the night. Our reading time seemed like a small, temporary paradise to me. Later, I've come to realize that all paradises are like that, humble and transitory.

Her voice, I listened to her voice and to the sounds of the story that she brought to life in my imagination: the splash of water against a ship's hull, the soft crunch of snow, the clang of two swords, the whistle of an arrow, mysterious footsteps, a wolf's howl, whispers behind a closed door. We felt very close, my mother and I, closer than ever but split between two parallel dimensions, outside and in, with the clock ticking in my bedroom for half an hour and whole years passing in the story, alone and surrounded by many people at the same time, the characters' friends and spies.

Back then, I lost my baby teeth one by one. My favorite thing to do while she told me a story was to wiggle a loose tooth with my finger, to feel it coming away from its root, dance ever more freely, and when it finally came out with a few salty traces of blood, lay it in my hand to observe it; my childhood was breaking, it left holes in my body and white shards along the way, the time for listening to stories would soon end, although I didn't know it then.

And when we arrived at an especially exciting part—a chase, the murderer close by, the mark of betrayal—my mother would clear her throat, faking a tickle, and cough, the agreed-upon signal for the first interruption. I can't read anymore. Then it was my turn to beg and plead: no, no, don't stop here, read a little more. I'm tired. Please, please. We acted out our little routine and then she would continue. I knew she was teasing me, of course, but it always scared me. In the end, one of the pauses would be real, and she would close the book, give me a kiss, leave me alone in the dark and enter into the secret life the grown-ups lived at night, passionate, mysterious, longed for, that foreign land where children were forbidden. The closed book would remain on the nightstand, stubbornly quiet. I was banished from the camps in the Yukon, the banks of the Mississippi, the Château d'If, Admiral Benbow's Inn, the Mountain of Souls, the Misiones jungles, Lake Maracaibo, Benia Kirk's Odessa neighborhood, Ventimiglia, Nevsky Prospect Avenue, Sancho Panza's la Ínsula Barataria, Shelob's lair, the Baskerville moor, Nizhny Novgorod, the Castle of No-Return, Sherwood Forest, Frankenstein's fearsome Ingolstadt laboratory, Cosimo's arboreal kingdom, the planet of the baobabs, the mysterious home of Yvonne de Galais, Fagin's Lair, the island of Ithaca. It was no use opening the book, I only saw lines of insect legs that refused to speak a single word. Without my mother's voice, the magic didn't become real. Yes,

reading was a spell that made those strange black insects on the page speak from the books that, back then, I thought looked like giant paper ant colonies.

Cristian Crusat

Marbella, 1983

Cristian Crusat (1983) is the author of the short story collections *Solitario empeño* (Pre-Textos, 2015), *Breve teoría del viaje y el desierto* (Pre-Textos, 2011), *Tranquilos en tiempo de guerra* (Pre-Textos, 2010) y *Estatuas* (Pre-Textos, 2006). He's also written the essays *Vidas de vidas* (Páginas de Espuma, 2015) and *Sujeto elíptico* (Pre-Textos, 2019), which won the Premio Tigre Juan 2019, a book that crosses borders of geography and genre, blending fiction, essay, and travel writing in an exploration of the universe of Berber culture. Crusat's work was recognized with the 2013 European Union Prize for Literature and had been anthologized in volumes such as Cuento Español actual: 1992-2012 (Cátedra, 2014). He has been translated into English, French, Italian, Dutch, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Turkish, Albanese, Hebrew, and Croatian. Crusat translated and edited the volume of articles and critical essays by Marcel Schwob, and has published articles, reviews, and translations in journals such as *Hispanic Research Journal*, *Revista de Occidente, Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, *Das Magazin*, and *Punto de partida*. Crusat earned his Doctorate in Humanities from the University of Amsterdam with a thesis in Comparative Literature. He has taught and conducted research at universities in Spain, France, the Netherlands, Morocco, and the United States. *Europa Automatiek* (2019) is his most recent book.

When and why did you start writing?

The truth is, a maniacal inertia compels me daily to continue something I started so long ago. As Georges Perec once said, the question is no longer "Why do I write?" but "Where was I? What was next?"

What themes are you concerned with?

Rootlessness, unease within the culture of globalization, foreignness, moves and trips, the narrow passage between the quotidien and the mythic, beaches, empty swimming pools.

Who are some of your favorite writers and influences?

Vila-Matas, Bolaño, Diógenes Laercio, Loriga, Baudelaire, De Quincey, Sebald, David Foster Wallace, Schwob, Tabucchi, Ford, Kiŝ, Ribeyro, and DeLillo.

As a fiction writer, what are some trends you have seen in recently published books? Which ones do you find most interesting?

Among contemporary sensibilities, I'm drawn to those that approach rooted in an intimate rootlessness (Sergio Chejfec, Aleksandar Hemon, Jhumpa Lahiri, Francesc Serés, Dubravka Ugrešić, Teju Cole, Sherman Alexie), tell stories about collisions between history and individual memory (Stefan Hertmans, J. G. Ballard, J. M. Coetzee), reveal the other side of private masks (Peter Stamm), widen the battlefield of biography (Pierre Michon, Pascal Quignard), or conceive of their texts as an exploration writing and the challenges of articulating a world (Marcelo Cohen). These trends are also present in the work of some poets I consider fundamental in recent decades (Tomas Tranströmer, Tomás Segovia) and essayists that fluently incorporate thought into narrative (Eliot Weinberger, Ramón Andrés, Pietro Citati).

If you could have been a writer in another place and time, when and where would you choose?

Grasmere in 1810. Paris in 1896. Mexico City in 1909.

Are you currently working on any new projects? If so, what are they?

I have an essay coming out this year. It's a dialect of allusions centered on W. G. Sebald's work, European nostalgia, the silence of Dutch suburbs, the Holocaust according to Larry David, and the basic principles of an ethic of the miniature.

SYNOPSIS

Amsterdam, the end of 2011. The aftershocks of the 2008 economic collapse are shaking Spain. Young people have been stripped of old ideas of the future and are subjected to new kinds of precariousness. Many leave for other countries in search of the dreams promised by the European ideal. Among them, a translator from Almería on the cusp of turning thirty. Seated in an armchair in his rented apartment in the center of Amsterdam, he follows Kim Jong-il's funeral on TV and plays episode after episode of *The Sopranos*. He's been wandering through different European countries for a few years, getting Masters degrees, forming part of the eternal lumpen-professorate; he came to Holland to teach Spanish in a local school. He earns little money, barely speaks Dutch, and is overqualified. He isolates himself, clings to his job, walks around the city. He is incapable of imagining his future and has lost his sense of belonging, of intimacy, of what home could be. But one morning, he will receive an unexpected visit that will unleash a crucial change in his life. The enigmatic figure of Tajana—daughter of Croatian refugees that fled the Balkan wars and settled in Amsterdam—will come to represent a new emotional key for him. And she will likewiseShe will personify the ghost of the nightmare of the Yugoslav Wars, a disturbing emblem of the conflicts that continually threaten the European project. With an immersive prose, gifted when it comes to detecting the subtlest tensions in the new social fabric of Spain and the rest of the continent, Europa Automatiek embarks on a lucid analysis of the contemporary sense that intimacy might be a trap, and of changes in both the public and private spheres. Always somewhereHovering between fiction and the personal essay, Crusat illuminates the extraordinary areas of European thought to create a novel about intimate adventures which, at the same time, unsettle our beliefs about Europe and our lives in it.

NOSTALGIA, TRANSITS

(From *Europa Automatiek*)

After two years in Amsterdam, I'd learned to identify the days of the week based on the air traffic out of Schiphol and the muted vibrations of KLM engines. It was a strangely intimate language, classifiable only to a foreigner; that is, someone who doesn't understand. It drew me to the windows of my apartment like a fine, nearly invisible thread: a simple petit-bourgeois tic with unexpected symbolic weight. I didn't expect much from the city: traces of kerosene evaporating in the ether, a cat napping on a balcony across the street, brick walls crowned unexpectedly with passion flowers, two grams of White Widow. And the persistent aroma of food, fried and battered. I couldn't hope for much more, except maybe a minimum wage job, a chimera throughout Europe at that point. Any anonymous horoscope would have asserted that I found myself in a period of personal transition.

That morning, I observed a fair number of red and green navigation lights blink across the sky, as I sullenly watched the slow-moving Dutch clouds pass like infinitely delayed obligations, leaning on one of the cherry bookshelves my landlady could come for at any moment. I was still in my pajamas, half-asleep and wearing two thick socks on each

foot, one indolently layered over the other. A characteristic scene on a Saturday morning, a lead-grey Saturday morning.

Those were the last days of 2011. I was in danger of getting used to that apartment, where I had only lived a short time. The ancient thermostat squealed, my second year in Amsterdam was ending, and I split my time between the hidden corners and archways of the language school—formerly a Greek restaurant—where I taught Spanish and worked on translating a book of essays and articles by W. G. C. Bijvanck. My days passed slowly, but relentlessly; the cold, rain, and snow in merciless repetition. *Pitchfork*'s album of the year was Bon Iver by *Bon Iver*. Everything seemed redundant.

I had started my aerial tally after a rather late breakfast. The TV was on low. On the screen, it was raining silently, just like it was raining out the plane windows. It rained every possible way in Amsterdam: vertically, continuously, in gusts, rising from the Earth's core. Even though I was willfully ignorant of what was happening in the world, I usually kept the TV on. I even turned it on while I worked (the habit of a lonely person, I suspect). I kept the TV on so that I could ignore it. The convulsive echoes of the outside world—on the news or in the sky—collided with my self-absorption as if in a solid anechoic chamber. I noted that a satirical T-shirt store had opened across the street, as well as a Vietnamese takeaway. I had a missed call from Ewa, which I didn't return. I weighed the possibility of watching *The Sopranos* for the fourth time, starting from the first episode: the ducks and all of that, etc. etc.

Routine is unresolved tension, fluctuating and fickle. Another crude way to pass the time, to uphold the status quo, our kingdom of the provisional.

But then the images on the screen caught my attention. Engrossed in the stream of electrons, I put down the *Sopranos*

DVD and settled into the armchair. I lit the end of a joint I'd left in the ashtray the night before. It was Saturday after all. The Dutch newscaster's voice was deep, nasal; a voice sprung from the deep Calvinist conviction that duty resides in all of us. That it involves us personally and determines our fate. A foul conviction, from my point of view back then.

I listened to the loathsome voice talk about Kim Jong-il, whose funeral was unfolding before me. I concentrated on the gigantic portrait of the North Korean leader, set atop a Lincoln limousine—the car so many political leaders parade, wave, and die in—advancing at a dream-like pace. His framed face—smiling, paternal, faintly scrutinizing—made its way through the fog, preceded by the headlights of the cars in the funeral procession rolling like silent, never-ending French New Wave film credits. The road, the car hoods, the tear-streaked cheeks of North Korean children, the scattered clouds . . . everything was covered in snow, enveloped in a blurred, alkaloid filter. The events seemed to unfold on one of Saturn's frozen rings, or in a valley of methane and ice on Pluto. The women and girls cried like women and girls; the men cried like resentful, sentimental fathers-in-law, frost on the tips of their hair, their gold-rimmed glasses, their narrow, opaque teeth. Girls in mourning moved through the crowd like the junkie who hocks anti-system newspapers outside Albert Heijn in Frederiksplein Square, where I shopped once a week. The girls crouched down low, ruminated for a few seconds, and suddenly changed direction, disoriented. They also reminded me of kids hunting for chocolate Easter eggs in the gardens of Amsterdam and the entire Noord-Holland region.

The year 2011 was turning out to be a bad one for dictators: Ben Ali had abandoned Tunisia and sought refuge in Saudi Arabia; Hosni Mubarak was overthrown in Egypt. Silvio Berlusconi had just resigned as the Italian Prime

Minister. I occasionally wasted time with short YouTube searches: "Bunga Bunga," "Gaddafi dead," "Gaddafi tunnel," "Gaddafi last moments." A black macaw from the Indonesian island of Sulawesi took a selfie and became a celebrity. The world broke apart in a blurred mosaic of ephemeral images every time one attempted to learn about the present. And in the meantime, the popular imagination gorged itself on human bodies with rabbit heads, kittens riding the backs of crocodiles or sleeping curled up in a bidet, Islamic terrorists buried at the bottom of some anonymous sea.

Maybe all fantasies eventually cede to new ways of desiring. In the meantime, the images that paraded before me, pixel after pixel, became the paradox of the diagnosis that is itself a symptom. It had only been two weeks since a thirty-three year old man committed a massacre in Liege, throwing hand grenades and firing his assault weapon before finally killing himself in a central square of the Belgian city.

I stood up to get the coffee mug I'd left in the microwave. I turned up the volume on the TV. I practically ran to the kitchen, unwilling to miss a single detail of Kim Jong-il's funeral. I was in an unexpectedly good mood. Leaning over the kitchen sink, I peered through the foggy window at what was visible outside, an attempt to persuade myself that there was no reason to be anywhere else or face the day in any other way from sitting, spellbound, before a simulacrum of obsequies for an Asian dictator.

The previous days' snowfall had turned to mud that lined both sides of my street, white-laced mud that resembled crème toasted by a cooking torch. The low Amsterdam sky idly encapsulated the city's inhabitants, inhabitants who need their Protestant work ethic to surmount the weather. I decided to put off my morning chores, returning instead to sit in front of the TV a while longer, in my pajamas.

There was nothing spontaneous or disorderly about the funeral being broadcast from Pyongyang. "Organization" and "death": two concepts that should have said it all about a time period that was dragging on too long (or, more aptly, subtly transforming into something simultaneously more pleasant and much worse). Maybe the snow was fake, part of the staging. The crowd was seized by self-flagellation as an alternative to the masquerade. The funeral goers were clearly sexually aroused. But I honestly felt moved, or maybe I was under the same spell as the attendees . . . Our civilization was apparently reaffirmed in the fervent romantic axiom that what hasn't happened will never grow old. Particles accelerated in Geneva; bees were being decimated; Ping-Pong balls shot from the vaginas of Thai prostitutes; it was crumbling, crumbling fast.

I was calculating the size of the retinue as it appeared in an aerial shot courtesy of North Korean television when the doorbell rang.

Once, twice.

I sat up, turned down the volume, and waited in silence as I considered what to do.

One ring, two.

It was unfortunate that I couldn't record the end of the funeral, like in the old days of VHS tapes with stickers on the spines. "Kim Jong-il Funeral. TOP," I would have written. The doorbell was still ringing, so I stood up, stubbed out the joint, and opened the window to air out the living room and wake myself up. I looked out the window and saw two girls in their early twenties standing three feet from the door. When I called down to ask what they were selling, they looked at each other in surprise, like a pair of recently-separated Siamese twins.

"Where's Emmy?" one of the girls asked.

Caught off-guard, I told them I had no idea who they were talking about.

"Are you related to Emmy, the owner?" The same girl continued her interrogation.

I didn't know where my landlady was. That was the absolute truth. And besides, her name wasn't Emmy.

I realized that the girls were sisters. They spoke Dutch with an unusual accent. The one firing off questions was undoubtedly the older sister. She was long and slender, with plenty of resolve. Like many young Dutch women (though she clearly wasn't one), she wore her hair pulled back into a stiff blond ponytail and was dressed for hiking or mountain climbing, ready for the next downpour or sudden freeze. And like any native of Amsterdam, she was able to launch an invisible probe into the soul of whomever she spoke to. Faced with her inquisition, my scant replies seemed to come from the swampy depths of a blocked well. Everything about her was impenetrable, aseptic, rigid. Including her rudeness.

She asked if they could come in.

"Your Dutch is pretty good," she said as she walked through the door, apparently uninterested in my nationality.

I stepped aside for the younger sister, who smelled faintly of an unaired room.

"I'm a translator, so I don't really have a choice," I said, to no one in particular.

Well, I also gave classes. Not the private lessons I used to teach—twenty euros an hour, six or seven a week—back in my other apartment, an extremely small flat on Indische Buurt and the second place I lived in Amsterdam. That was behind me now. I had taken on a few classes in the language school, but only because they were a complement to my translation work and gave my life structure. People to talk to.

It wasn't that unusual that I had let a pair of strangers into my house—I've never learned to manage the sort of conversations that happen in doorways. The girls were a

pleasant, unforeseen change in the miasma of the morning, a small step up from counting airplanes while the North Koreans wilted under the death of their supreme leader.

As it turned out, the sisters had grown up in that apartment years before. They hadn't actually lived there very long, the one who spoke told me. But it was a really intense time.

The other girl nodded.

"What do you think? Has it changed much?" I asked as I swung the open casement window back and forth, airing out the smoke and my unexpected distress over Kim Jong-il. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd had visitors. I felt momentarily exuberant, full of curiosity, as if I owned the apartment and was starting negotiations with potential buyers (or perhaps the reason was simpler, more pathetic: I needed anonymous approval for my so-called lifestyle). But the silent sister put her hand to her mouth and cleared her throat disapprovingly. I found that pretty annoying, and decided not to offer them coffee. They didn't say anything to each other, either.

Life in Amsterdam had been meandering along incredibly slowly, and suddenly, it seemed to be off like a shot.

"Feel free to take a look around. I assume that's why you came, right?"

Stung by their criticism and invasion of my personal space, my brief bubble of euphoria popped. I sank down in the armchair and relit what was left of the joint. The North Korean retinue continued marching amid cheers, bows and—I imagine—hidden instructions from the directors and managers of the performance. Dully, I observed the older sister at the foot of the stairs, who made a wordless request go up to the second floor. Her insistence was unpleasant. She was tougher, more stubborn, than nails.

"I just rent this one floor, but I guess it's fine if you want to take a look."

I didn't usually go upstairs, the attic space my landlady kept available for her own use when she came to Amsterdam, which hadn't happened yet. I aired it out once a week and made sure everything was in order.

I followed the girls upstairs, keeping a watchful eye.

They came back down quickly, probably uncomfortable with my intrusive presence. They strolled around my things in silence, creeping softly, muffling their steps as if they were in a museum. The parquet absorbed their footfalls like damp earth. I watched them inspect the moldings and light switches, turn on the faucet, linger before the ancient thermostat and the bindings of my Bijvanck books. The silent girl, the younger one, stopped at the little corner where I usually worked.

"What did you use that space for?" I buried the roach in the ashtray and exhaled spitefully in her direction.

She turned, arms crossed, and gave me a look something between offended and proud. In contrast with her sister, she was dressed like a secretary. Her name was Tajana, although at the time I heard "Tatiana." She told me that it had been a sort of laundry room. She pointed to a pair of hooks at the height of the door lintel and covered with white paint. It was where her mother tied a line to hang up the washing.

"I don't know who Emmy is, but I can ask my landlady the next time I see her. Emmy was probably the person she bought the house from."

On the other side of the apartment, I heard the toilet flush.

"Incredible," the older sister was saying. "It's the same flush."

I saw her leave the bathroom, the water rumbling and spouting roughly in the tank. Near to where she stood, I got a whiff of something untoward.

It was true.

I was shocked.

She had relieved herself in my house.

"Damn, was that really necessary?" I asked in disgust. I went to the armchair and shut the windows against the cold. "Your nostalgia must run pretty deep."

She said nothing and looked over at her sister, still lost in the memory of the old clothesline. The two girls peered out the window beside my desk, their scents commingling, creating space for themselves among my belongings. A sort of space-scent dome was growing around the objects that represented me, an intermittent annexation that left me confused, disarmed, dispossessed. I had tried to make them uncomfortable, but was now uneasy myself. I decided to offer them coffee and bring the situation to a civilized close. It's Saturday, I thought.

"Sounds good. Looks like you haven't eaten yet," the older girl said, pointing to my pajamas and slippers as she hung her mountaineering backpack on the back of a chair. She went over to the TV. "Hey, who died?"

I replied that I had, in fact, just made myself coffee when they arrived. I turned down the volume and recounted what I had seen of the funeral.

"I'll get some croissants," she said. "We'll have breakfast."

She made no reference to my news about North Korea.

The girl dug around in the backpack's various pockets, pulled out a change purse, and announced that she'd be back in five minutes. Her sister and I listened to her steps down the stairs and the squeak of the front door as it opened and shut behind her. I went to put on the coffee pot. I heard a text ding on my phone in the living room. Probably Ewa.

I found two clean mugs. The sugar bowl. I sighed. Seconds later, the silent Tajana came in and asked if she could go into the bathroom.

"It really is nostalgia," she said. I caught her peculiar scent of withering flowers. "That's all. I promise."

Gabriela Ybarra

Bilbao, 1983

Gabriela Ybarra has a degree in Business Administration and works as a marketing consultant. Her debut novel, *The Dinner Guest*, won the Premio Euskadi de Literatura in 2016 and, in 2018, the English translation (by Natasha Wimmer) was e Man Booker International. *The Dinner Guest* has also been translated into Italian. Ybarra has also written texts and short stories for the Spanish press, such as *El País*, *ABC,* and *El Mundo*, for literary magazines such as *Eñe* and *Letras Libres*, and international publications like *The Big Issue* and *The Freedom Papers*, as well as for the books *Lo infraordinario* (gristormenta, 2018) and *El gran libro de los gatos* (Blackie Books, 2019).

When and why did you start writing?

I started writing at the same time that I learned how to read, around the age of six. During my childhood, when my friends came over to play, we often made up stories and performed them for my mother. I wrote my first stories on my bedroom floor, dressed up as my characters.

What themes are you concerned with?

I'm interested in analyzing how the family and the spaces we inhabit influence who we are; and how violence and terrorism have an impact on daily life. Lately, I've also been reflecting a lot on my childhood, especially what it means to live, lose, and remember it. Being with my two-year-old son allows me to recoup the slow time of children.

Who are some of your favorite writers and influences?

Elvira Navarro, Joan Didion, Philip Roth, Anne Carson, W.G. Sebald, Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio, Carmen Martín Gaite, Roald Dahl, Natalia Ginzburg, Virginia Woolf, Georges Perec, Judith Kerr . . .

As a fiction writer, what are some trends you have seen in recently published books? Which ones do you find most interesting?

I'm interested in hybrid books, books that blend various literary genres and include elements from other disciplines, such as philosophy or the visual arts. Otherwise, I don't follow trends all that closely.

If you could have been a writer in another place and time, when and where would you choose?

I'm comfortable living in Madrid in the twenty-first century, but I wouldn't mind having a time machine and spending my vacations in other epochs. I'm sure looking back at the past and toward the future would help me better understand our time.

Are you currently working on any new projects? If so, what are they?

I'm writing a fictional novel that begins from a personal experience: my family's move from Bilbao to Madrid in 1995, when I was twelve. This event is allowing me to explore a lot of the things I'm interested in as a writer: Basque terrorism, the family, paradises lost . . .

SYNOPSIS

In 1977, three terrorists dressed as nurses broke into Gabriela Ybarra's grandfather's home, and carried him off at gunpoint. This was the last time his family saw Javier Ybarra alive. Ybarra first heard the story when she was eight, but it was only after her mother's death, years later, that she felt the need to go deeper and discover more about her family's past.

The Dinner Guest is a prize-winning debut novel that connects two life-changing events—the very public death of Ybarra's grandfather, and the more private pain as her mother dies from cancer and Gabriela cares for her.

THE DINNER GUEST

(From *The Dinner Guest*)

I

The story goes that in my family there's an extra dinner guest at every meal. He's invisible, but always there. He has a plate, glass, knife and fork. Every so often he appears, casts his shadow over the table and erases one of those present.

The first to vanish was my grandfather.

The morning of 20 May, 1977, Marcelina put a kettle on the stove. While she was waiting for it to come to the boil, she took a feather duster and began to dust the china. Upstairs, my grandfather was getting into the shower, and at the end of the hallway, where the doors made a U, the three siblings who still lived at home were in bed. My father didn't live there anymore, but on his way elsewhere from New York he had decided to come to Neguri to spend a few days with the family.

When the bell rang, Marcelina was far from the door. As she ran the feather duster over a Chinese vase she heard someone calling from the street: 'There's been an accident, open up!' and she ran to the kitchen. She glanced for a second at the kettle, which had begun to whistle, and slid the bolt

without looking through the peephole. On the doorstep, four hooded attendants opened their coats to reveal machine guns.

'Where is Don Javier?' asked one. He pointed a gun at the girl, obliging her to show them the way to my grandfather. Two men and a woman went up the stairs. The third man stayed below, watching the front door and rifling through papers.

My father woke when he felt something cold graze his leg. He opened his eyes and saw a man raising the sheet with the barrel of a gun. From across the room, a woman repeated that he should relax, no one was going to hurt him. Then she moved slowly towards the bed, took his wrists and handcuffed them to the headboard. The man and the woman left the room, leaving my father alone, manacled, his torso bare and his face turned upward.

Thirty seconds went by, a minute, maybe longer. After a while, the hooded figures came back into the room. But this time they weren't alone; with them were two of my father's brothers and his youngest sister.

My grandfather was still in the shower when he heard someone shouting and banging on the door. He turned off the water, and when the noise didn't stop, he wrapped himself in a towel and poked his head out the door to see what was going on. A masked man had Marcelina under his arm; with his other hand he held the machine gun pointing through the open door. The man came into the bathroom and sat on the toilet. He grabbed the maid by the skirt and forced her to kneel in a puddle on the floor. Just inches away, my grandfather tried to comb his hair, his eyes on the gun reflected in the mirror. He put on hair cream, but his fingers were shaking and he couldn't make a straight parting. When he was done he came out of the bathroom and collected a

rosary, his glasses, an inhaler and his missal. He knotted his tie, and with the machine gun at his back he walked to the bedroom where his children were.

The four of them were waiting on the bed, watching the woman who had Marcelina by the wrists. In the silence, the whistle of the kettle could be heard.

When she was done securing the maid, the woman went down to the kitchen, set the kettle on the counter and turned off the stove. Meanwhile, on the floor above, her companions shifted the captives. First they made them move to the ends of the bed, leaving a space. Then they pulled off my grandfather's tie and sat him in the middle.

The biggest man took a camera out of the black leather bag at his waist and pulled the ski mask out of the way to look through the viewfinder, but neither my father nor his siblings nor my grandfather looked at him. The hooded man snapped his fingers a few times to get their attention, and when he finally succeeded he pressed the shutter three times.

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A point that has yet to be cleared up is the whereabouts of the photographs that the kidnappers took of the family, and the three snapshots of Ybarra that they removed from the house. "I can confirm that we haven't received any of the three pictures of my father as evidence,' stated one of the children. 'We don't know what might have happened to them, or to the photographs that were taken of the family with my father moments before he was carried off. The photographs are of those of us who were at home at the time, together with him, saying our goodbyes.'

El País, Friday, 24 June, 1977

***

Mount Serantes was covered by a dense, heavy fog that broke up into heavy rain. Torrents poured down the mountainside into the Nervión estuary, which filled up gradually, like a bathtub. Its banks didn't overflow, but the banks of the Gobela, a river very near my grandfather's house, did. On Avenida de los Chopos the water spilled into the street, covered the pavements and surged into garages. Some cars' headlights came on by themselves. From inside the house the sound of the rain was loud, like someone throwing bread crusts at the windows. Outside, a number of roads were cut off: Bilbao-Santander near Retuerto, Neguri-Bilbao along the valley of Asúa, and Neguri-Algorta.

Beginning at 8.15 in the morning, cars piled up on the roads into Bilbao, in an 18-kilometre traffic jam that reached as far as Getxo. All over Vizcaya, the rain, the cars and the slap of wipers on windscreens could be heard. My grandfather was shut in the trunk of a SEAT 124D sedan making a slow getaway. In the front were two of the kidnappers, with the radio on. No one knew anything yet. 'Y te amaré', by Ana y Johnny, could still be heard between traffic and news breaks.

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The articles from the days that followed the kidnapping are sketchy and brief. The first in-depth report I find was published on 25 May, 1977, in *Blanco y Negro*, a supplement of the newspaper

ABC. It's titled 'The Worst They Can Do Is Shoot Me'. A few lines below, a column heading reads: 'Handcuffs French-Made'.

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When my father trod in the puddles in the garden, he hadn't yet managed to get the handcuffs off. Upon reaching the gate, he pushed it open with his shoulder and stepped out. Water was rushing over the paving stones. My father scrutinized the street, the lamp post, the bushes, and the soaked hair of a woman loaded with shopping bags who stopped to his left. The woman put the bags on the ground to cover her head and said hello. He answered politely but briefly and walked on, getting wet, until he stopped in front of a house with stone walls, and hedges whipping between the rails of the fence. He rang the bell. He said: 'Hello, I live next door. Can I use the phone?' There was a buzz, the door quivered, and a maid with her hair in a bun asked him to come in. She led him into the house, stopped in front of a bone-coloured telephone on the wall and handed him the receiver. When she saw the handcuffs her mouth went a funny shape and she crossed herself. My father, dripping, dialled the police quickly without looking at her. He gave his first name, his last name, his location and a summary of what had happened that morning. Then he was silent, listening to the officer. The maid's eyes popped, as round as her bun. My father, though, looked calm.

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Before leaving, the intruders warned my father and his siblings that they couldn't report the kidnapping until midday. At a quarter to twelve, two of the brothers managed to pull free of the bed frame. At twelve thirty the police arrived, followed fifteen minutes later by the press.

The officers freed the women first. Last was my youngest uncle, who, once he was released, ran down to the garden to shout my grandfather's name among the hydrangeas. My father spoke to the reporters on the porch. They stuck their tape recorders under his chin and he said, 'Everyone behaved impeccably. We were calm the entire time.'

As the lunch hour neared, more policemen and reporters came. The rest of the siblings and some cousins arrived too. The oldest brother gazed down the road. Meanwhile, the youngest was still in the garden looking for my grandfather in the hydrangeas.

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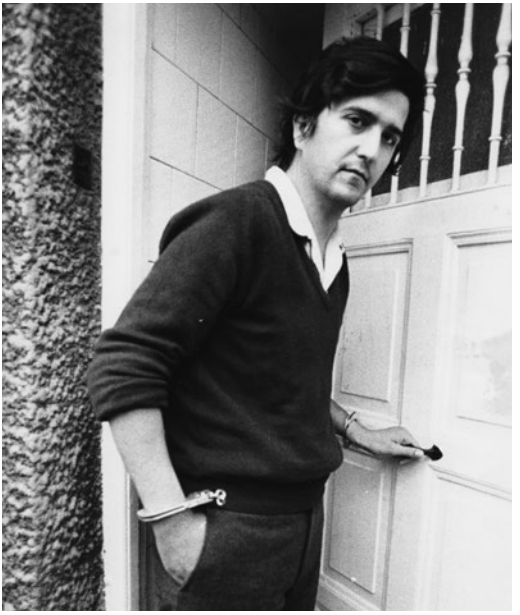
The oldest had blue eyes and was wearing a green anorak and jeans. The second, dark and thin, was wearing a dark checked shirt. The woman, slim, was wearing an orange raincoat. The fourth, of medium height, never took off his white coat. The four assailants ranged in age from twenty to twenty-five.

Blanco y Negro, Wednesday, May 25, 1977



II

The wind came in the back door, circling the burners of the stove and knocking at the windows. The air on one side of the glass thumped against the air on the other side. The guests had gone and everyone who was left gathered in the living room, taking stock of the situation. On the floor, books and family photographs were still scattered; a bronze frame lay empty, and the wind cavorted at will, ruffling the fringe of the rug and making little tornados over the sofa.

The sawn-off handcuffs were sitting on the chest of drawers in the hall. Next to them were four lengths of rope, and the scraps of cotton with which the kidnappers had wrapped the women's wrists so as not to hurt them. The strips of tape for their mouths and the cloths used to cover their faces were in the bin in the kitchen. None of the siblings wanted to sleep alone in their rooms. They chose to lie down together, sprawled on the sofa.

Since the police had left, no one had returned to the back room. It upset my father and his siblings to remember the brass bars of the bed to which they had been bound. They were also haunted by the voices of the kidnappers, echoing soft and polite in their heads, the musical, bell-like Don Javier with which their captors had addressed my grandfather, never lowering their machine guns.

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The siblings spent the day after the kidnapping in the living room of the house where the crime had been committed. The oldest brother stroked his chin. The youngest played at putting on and taking off his shoes with a nudge of the

finger. On the table by the door there was a telephone that rang incessantly. A sibling exclaimed and took the receiver off the hook, leaving it on the tabletop. The noise ceased. Those present gathered around the sofa for protection from the silence.

Time passed, night fell and still there was no information about my grandfather. My father and his siblings paced the room. They moved to and from the sofa, clustered around it, leaned on it, stood. On the coffee table the radio was on, waiting for the news. The announcer began to speak precisely at ten, but there was no update on the kidnapping or my grandfather.

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Outside the house nothing seemed to be happening, but a closer look would have revealed two Guardia Civil officers sitting in jeeps parked by the gate. The headlights and engines of the jeeps were turned off, but every half hour the drivers started their engines and cruised the streets around the house: down Avenida de los Chopos and Carretera de la Avanzada, along the Gobela river, and past the church of El Carmen. At four in the morning the streets were empty and no light showed in the windows of the house. Inside, no one was asleep; the siblings lay there awake in the dark, listening to one another's breathing.

My father got up from the sofa, opened the balcony door and went out to smoke a cigarette. It had stopped raining, but there were still drops of water on the railings. Inside the house, the memory of my grandfather was suffocating; recurring images of the kidnapping. But outside there was a breeze and he could think about the leaks at his apartment

in Harlem, or about a bombed-out building he had visited in the Bronx. He extinguished his cigarette in the plumpest drop of water on the ledge and left the stub in a flower pot. He remembered he had to pick up some rolls of film from a lab in the centre of Bilbao. Then he looked out at the garden and thought about all the things he wanted to do when the kidnapping was over. He lit another cigarette and smoked it with his gaze on the branches of a chestnut tree.

At eleven thirty in the morning on Sunday, 22 May, an anonymous voice, feminine and fragile as a baby bird, called the Radio Popular broadcasting station: 'We've got Javier Ybarra,' it said, stumbling over the words. In the background, cars and the shouts of children could be heard. 'Check the mailbox in front of Number 37, Calle Urbieta in San Sebastián,' the voice said before hanging up.

The postman didn't like this particular mailbox, because every time he opened it, the rusty hinges squealed like a rodent. The mailbox was old. The rain had made channels between the bald patches where the paint was worn off, and now an enormous stain covered its domed top.

The document turned up in the spot indicated, in parts. First one typed sheet, then another, and finally the third. They hadn't been stapled or clipped together. The statement was unusually long, and written in a way that made it seem fake: there was no clear acknowledgement of the kidnapping or conditions for return. The postman, accompanied by a policeman, found only typewritten musings that left no opening for negotiation.

Meanwhile, my father and his siblings were still shut up in the house on Avenida de los Chopos, waiting for news, receiving the press and trying to communicate with the kidnappers. Around three in the morning, the oldest came into the living room, arm in arm with his wife. No one was

sleeping. 'They want a billion pesetas,' he said, and tossed a bundle of bills on the table. The siblings spent all night counting money. The sum the kidnappers were demanding was impossible. When morning came, the older siblings made the rounds of the banks to see about a loan. The rest stayed home, pacing the living room and talking to reporters: 'It's a lie that they're asking for a billion pesetas,' said one of my uncles to the press. 'How did your father react last Friday?' asked one reporter. 'He showed no qualms about being kidnapped, not for a second. He got dressed, collected his hat and some books, and tried to reassure us,' said my father.

Sabina Urraca

San Sebastián, 1984

Sabina Urraca is Basque by birth, was raised in Tenerife, and has lived in Madrid for over fifteen years. She has been an insurance salesperson, a waitress, a scriptwriter, reporter, TV and advertising creative, presenter, and marijuana cutter. She has written for media publications such as *El Paía*, *Eldiario.es*, *Vice*, and *Cinemanía*. She is the author of the novel *Las niñas prodigio* (Fulgencio Pimentel), winner of the Premio Javier Morote, awarded from the Spanish Federation of Bookseller Guilds and Associations, and selected for New Spanish Books. Her work is featured in the anthologies *La errabunda: Primer tratado ibérico de deambulología heterodoxa* (Lindo&Espinosa) and T*ranquilas: Historias para ir solas por la noche* (Lumen). In 2017, Urraca delivered a TED talk called Escaping the Girl Prodigy. Currently, she teaches writing at the Escuela Fuentetaja and is the 2020 resident editor at Editorial Barrett. En 2020 recibió la beca de escritura de la Universidad de Iowa.

When and why did you start writing?

I grew up surrounded by great fabulists, so I remember making up stories before I knew how to write.

What themes are you concerned with?

I'm interested in describing things that I believe can only be explained and understood through literature. At the same time, I feel something—something I can only define as anxiousness—that makes me want to transmit all the literary moments that present themselves to me throughout the day.

Who are some of your favorite writers and influences?

Natalia Ginzburg, Raymond Carver, Valérie Mréjen, Nabokov, Charlotte Roche, Salinger, A. M. Homes. And comic book writers and graphic novelists like Bechdel, Chester Brown, Daniel Clowes, Julie Doucet, Tamburini, and Liberatore. Not to mention social media, an inexhaustible source of unconscious literature.

As a fiction writer, what are some trends you have seen in recently published books? Which ones do you find most interesting?

I'm interested in the recognition that we are in played-out times, absurd and full of despair. I really appreciate the literature that takes material from that place and gobbles it up shamelessly. I'm also interested in extreme self-awareness, self criticism, and ironic distance from oneself. I obsessively read Lydia Davis, Mariana Enriquez, Fabián Casas. And others nearer to me, like María Fernanda Ampuero, Jorge de Cascante, Elisa Victoria, and Mercedes Cebrián.

If you could have been a writer in another place and time, when and where would you choose?

Any in which more writers were needed. I write out of my own necessity, in order not to explode, not because I believe that what I write is necessary.

Are you currently working on any new projects? If so, what are they?

I'm writing a novel that takes place during the fifteen days a bitch is in heat and rests on the question of whether or not we, as humans, would be capable of crossing eight lanes of moving traffic, at the risk of being hit by a car and dying, abducted by love and sex. Obviously, the answer is yes. The question is how and why.

SYNOPSIS

Wracked by the stigma of an *amor fou* for an older, alcoholic man, *Las niñas prodigio* is a partly autobiographical novel, and also a tragicomedy in multiple acts and a tale tinged with gothic horror. Above all, it is a contemporary story of identity that departs from an imperfect present and retraces all the ages of a woman's past. The narrator—pansexual, cutting, emotionally voracious—begins her own particular journey toward perfection through a gallery of ghosts, both real and imagined, that will shape popular culture and her own childhood.

LAS NIÑAS PRODIGIO

(From *Las niñas prodigio* / Girl Prodigies)

Little Knives

"Who's the oldest?"

"They're twins."

"Would you little girls like some candy?"

"They don't like it."

Their mother didn't let them have sweets. The pediatrician told her that sugar could make them even wilder. Occasionally, she let them have a little bit of a Dan-up yogurt drink; otherwise, it was plain yogurt, no chocolate milk.

"He's looking at me."

"No, he's looking at me."

Paula and Raisa stood in front of the Michael Jackson poster, vying for his attention.

"No way! He's looking at me! At me!"

Actually, Michael was looking at me, arms crossed in the leather jacket, those kiss-curls. Any girl would naturally want to come between us.

I didn't take sides. All by themselves, they would provoke the explosion I so loved to watch.

Sometimes Paula and Raisa would chase each other around the house with knives. Their mother would lay her head on the table and cry. She kept a handkerchief tucked in her sleeve and used it to mop the bitter tears of having raised two daughters who wanted to kill one another. She would look at me and whisper, as if in prayer:

Blessed Christ!
What I've done wrong . . .
Little Lord Jesus, come take me . . .

Then she'd go back to folding the cloth napkins she used for the family's Sunday lunch, face hidden in her hankie, tearful little spasms running down her back.

I would just eat my afternoon snack, not knowing how to respond. In the cupboard, there was a container of Cola Cao all for me.

"You're a calm child, can't you teach these savages to respect each other?"

What could I say? By that point, she should have known that if I kept coming back every Thursday after guitar lessons, it was because I enjoyed the spectacle.

Those fights were the most beautiful performances I had ever seen. Fibrous animals, rolling on the floor and twisting each other's arms. It was like one of those documentaries that show lions fighting in slow motion. You can almost see what their insides are like; with every movement, the body contorts in such a way that we can imagine the shape of bone and muscle. In Paula's fights with her sister, they were crocodiles baring their teeth, a boa constrictor swallowing a tapir whole, a stampede of buffalo shaking my dumb, only-child body.

Above all, the twins' thrashings were a live enactment of a myth or fable in which the individual bests him- or herself.

The will to dominate, surpass, break oneself.

And when their arms, legs, and teeth weren't enough, Paula would say:

"We're getting out the knives."

My heart would seize with fear and pleasure. I looked at the mother, who paused her knitting and sobbed a soft no, wracked by a new wave of tears. She stood up in alarm, sat back down, crossed herself.

"Blessed Christ!"

"What have we done?"

The father was an amateur radio hobbyist. He spent hours in the back room at the end of the hallway. You could make out the snorting of machines, crackling, whispered words from behind the door. Never any laughter or audible conversations.

As his home came down around him amid shouts, punches, and knife thrusts in the air, he went on communicating with whomever it was he communicated. Amateur radio people always freaked me out. They were distant uncles, the fathers of friends, brownish, amorphous presences in a shed at the back of the garden. Who did they talk to? Nobody knew. With other people who had also built their own radios and were transmitting the same brownish disquiet from the darkness of a similar ramshackle room.

Once I knew all about the thing with the penis and the vagina and the seed in the form of a big white spray, it amazed me that such a grey and silent man had been able to produce enough fluid to conceive, in one go, two creatures with as much intensity as Paula and Raisa. And even though their mother sobbed and wailed in anguish, in truth she was a dragon guarding her lair. Her daughters would never really breach that territory. All she wanted was to be left in peace.

There was a photograph of her in the living room: young, trapped in a monstrous pregnancy, her head like a miniature meatball. But there was a spark in her eye, burning somewhere far from the creatures deforming her body. It wasn't that she had untamed thoughts, exactly, or yearned for freedom. She simply would have been happier to crochet with the TV on, wiping down the leaves of her plants with a damp cloth. Alone in her living room, no obligation to pretend she was worried. My inkling was confirmed when, as Raisa and Paula ripped out chunks of each other's hair, she sighed and her eyes shone with one powerful desire:

"I should have been old maid."

I don't think either of us believed that Paula and Raisa's fights really represented a danger: they fought so well and so often, they knew every sharp corner, every piece of furniture in that house, down to the last detail. Theirs was a complicated, choreographed routine of hate in which each punch was perfectly planned and no neck ever smacked down on the edge of any table. Only occasionally would blood trickle from a nose or knuckles scrape on the stucco walls. One of them would end up crying, huddled on the floor, very still. The other would approach and poke her sister gently with a toe.

"Hey. Get up, you twat."

She would wait a few seconds, breathing heavily, all her senses on alert. Suddenly, the surprise of the blood would vanish and another explosion would detonate. The windmill of kicks and furious spitting resumed and the mother cried as she scrubbed pots and pans.

They would finally end it together, damp and exhausted, in front of *Dragon Ball Z*. They both liked to sing along to the theme song at the start of the show. They sang over the lyrics, competing to be the first one to sing the next line.

Their mother would come in with a big bottle of milk and leave it on the rug. We watched cartoons and took turns drinking out of the bottle. Mixed with the milk, I could sense an aftertaste of sweat and violence that would never be mine.

Then, all of a sudden, one little shove, the bottle poorly passed, and their hate was resuscitated. Paula looked at her sister and got up. As she walked to the kitchen we heard her say:

"I'm getting the knives . . ."

Their mother rushed toward the balcony.

"I'll kill myself! Kill myself! I can't live like this! I'll kill myself!"

She moaned but continued dusting the leaves on her plants. She opened a window and looked at the sky as she dusted the geraniums with dry leaves. She stuck out her hand to see if it was raining and adjusted a twisted clothespin.

Little Lord Jesus, come and take me.

Sometimes they used me as a shield. Being part of the fight made me shudder with pleasure. They tossed my body around. They rarely hurt me, but when it happened, they would spend hours spoiling me. They made me a bed of pillows, fixed me a tall glass of Cola Cao and helped me drink it; my hands didn't touch the glass at any point.

I went home with chocolate milk stains down my neck and shirt. I practiced throwing punches at my own shadow, throwing myself to the floor to wrestle it down.

Other times, they would start fighting and forget halfway through why they'd started to argue in the first place. In these cases, one of the sisters would play the one card that never failed to stoke the fire.

"Mamá, tell her who's the oldest."

Their mother shrugged.

"I don't know! They gave me so many meds . . . I was completely out of it . . ."

But they would keep begging her to try and remember, to say who was the oldest, and therefore the best, the one who was right.

In the shower, they studied their brown bodies, their dark hair and eyes, lightly scratched, searching for the mark that would reveal the rightful owner of firstborn status.

The day that they lost the same tooth just an hour apart, my fascination took them out of their struggle for primogeniture. The two teeth wrapped in tin foil were my gift that day, and for a long time I carried them around in my pocket. Sometimes, when I felt like I needed a bit of murderous energy, I would stick my hand in my pocket and squeeze the little wad.

We were out on the balcony that afternoon, comparing the lifelines on their palms to see whose was longest. Who had been born first, in other words. Suddenly, as if motivated by a renewed hate, Raisa shoved Paula hard. Her teeth smacked against the railing.

The metal boomed and vibrated. Paula stood up heavily. She was very pale. She brought her hand to her mouth. A little stream of blood trickled down her wrist. She walked slowly toward the front door. In the doorway, she opened her bloodstained mouth and said, shaking:

"Well. We'll see who's the oldest. I'm going to the hospital to ask."

She slammed the door shut. Raisa shrugged and took out Hungry Hungry Hippos.

We heard the shouts after a decent amount of time had passed. They were so deep and strange that I thought they

must have been coming from a drunk in the street, or a dying dog.

Their mother complained from the kitchen.

"What's happened now? Between the two of you, you're going to kill me! I should have stayed single . . ."

We were halfway through our game and Raisa was turning increasingly pale. Just as she was about to beat me, both of us pressing madly on the lever to open our hippo's snout, Raisa jumped to her feet and went running toward the front door. I followed. The door was open and the shouts were echoing in the stairwell. I saw Raisa climbing the stairs, her sister in her arms. Paula's body looked limp and broken, but shrieks of pain were emanating from her mouth, from which a thin red thread still streamed.

Raisa's clothes were stained in blood. Her face was deadpan, but she was crying.

The whole time Paula was in the hospital, Raisa didn't show up at school either. We wrote them letters that our teacher corrected, leaving a trail of red ink.

I went to see them the following Thursday, after guitar. They were on the couch, watching TV. Paula couldn't speak. She wore a splint, and metal wires came out of her mouth and attached to a structure that immobilized her neck. The lower half of her face was swollen, bruised in places. Beside the couch was an IV drip that ended in a line inserted in her arm.

I sat on the corner of the couch and watched them. Neither one took their eyes from the screen.

Their mother appeared with a tray. Cookies, two chocolate milks, and a little box of pills. Paula, who couldn't eat, looked at the tray out of the corner of her eye and parted her lips with difficulty. Her mother very carefully gave her a pill and a bit of water, just like when the twins had made up for hurting

me by feeding me my afternoon snack. Then Raisa opened her mouth, and her mother gave her a pill, too. She washed it down with Cola Cao and settled back against her sister as if she were worn out. The little curtain at the start of the manga show Ranma appeared on screen. First Raisa, then Paula, began to follow the tune, softly:

La vida es dura
Hay que pelear
No es fácil
ni para Ranma

Paula could barely sputter. Raisa started to stroke her hair, distractedly, eyes trained on the screen. Paula rested her head on her sister's chest, as if in the grip of extreme weakness.

They were asleep when I left, cuddled up against each other, almost symmetrical. They looked like the same person before and after an accident.

When I stepped into my building, I saw Henri's trampled jacket hanging on the railing in the foyer. It was possible someone had found it lying in the stairwell.

I knew that he would be on his couch, half-unconscious from booze. I grabbed the jacket and started to fold it. My hands lost their strength and the jacket fell to the floor.

Once inside my apartment, I locked myself in the bathroom. I took out the ball of tin foil and opened it. The twins' teeth looked more yellow than the last time I'd looked at them. I took them out of the foil, put them on my tongue, and drank straight from the tap. I felt how they scratched my throat.

I looked at myself in the mirror. I saw the soft face of a girl without knives, punches, or betrayal. Or a broken palate. My own hand came at me fast, with unusual force. It

was a sharp slap and I was almost surprised, despite the fact that I'd ordered myself to do it. I liked the shine in my eyes, my cheeks bright with color. My eyes watered but, still, I repeated the move one more time.

At the start of the next school year, my mother told me that the twins had moved to another island, to live with their grandmother. Their mother had sent them to a private school and was now living alone, except for the burbling of the modulated frequencies emanating from the end of the hall.

During Easter break, I started exchanging letters through *El Pequeño País* with a boy from a village in Galicia.

On the back of a passport photo he had sent me, I read: This picture is from a while ago. I don't have as many pimples now.

And the P.S.: I love writing to you. You're the only girl I know who isn't from my family.

Karl, Marino, a Bitch

My house is located where two hills that form a valley converge. Thick vegetation conceals the structure right up to the last moment, when you almost run into it. A farmhouse, deliciously camouflaged by years of neglect.

Ivy covers the stone façade, the plants bordering the path point and jab, get in your eyes, unused to something in the way of their growth.

Once I saw in some documentary—I can't remember which—that the reason we feel panic when faced with a tiger, but not with a vine, is a simple question of speed. A tiger is faster than you are, it can leap upon you, kill you in no time. A plant could do it, too, if it weren't for its slowness. Surely it would want to. To demonstrate, the filmmaker

included a fixed, time-lapse shot of a jungle, an uninterrupted recording over several months. The plants suppressed each other, crushing the weakest specimens to the ground, burying them, strangling the stems within their reach, as they fought desperately to climb the highest, in search of light.

It follows that the peaceful greenery I am contemplating from my window is actually an excruciating, slow war. When the sun goes down, when there is no sound to be heard, I imagine that silence is the roar of battle.

From this same window, I can also watch the neighbor's dogs. Karl is Dutch, about sixty. He's lived here in his crumbling house for thirty years, yet he only speaks a few words of broken Spanish, interspersed with onomatopoeias of his own invention. We almost never see each other. Every once in a while I bring him a pot of what I've cooked and he, in turn, provides me with long chats full of noises and sound effects, it sounds like kids playing make-believe war.

Karl owns several dogs, but two clearly stand out. One is called Tina, after the great love who abandoned him and left him alone in these mountains; the other doesn't have a name. Tina is big with black, shiny fur. Sometimes I see her roving, dark form at night, her eyes shining very close together, and for a moment I mistake her for a wild boar.

The nameless one is a non-descript bitch with jutting canines and perpetually offended eyes. She has a big dog's head that contrasts with her small body. She eats like a bird of prey, opportunistically, behind the other dogs' backs, as if instead of a dog she was an old woman with Diogenes syndrome.

Sometimes, when the rest of the dogs are barking at a stranger coming up the path, the nameless bitch goes ahead, turns back to face her companions, and growls, as if she were defending the unknown walker. But I know she only does it for a chance to stand up to the others, to be contrary.

Thanks to my observations, I'm sometimes able to predict her behavior. I see her in a particular situation and I ask myself, what would I do?

Tonight, she's eating out of a rusty can. Every time she pulls her snout away, I see how the oxidized edges have cut her face. I leave the house and approach her. The can is almost empty, there's only a bit of meat at the bottom, but she keeps burrowing her nose inside, attempting to get the last morsel, hurting herself more and more in the process. I don't speak to her. She's whining in pain, but every time she lifts her head I ask myself what I would do in her place. I tell myself that I, too, would go back for more meat, regardless of how much my snout bled.

The ten or so houses in the valley are inhabited by people who have renounced some things and taken others, people who sometimes feel alone, misunderstood by the rest of the world, but hold firm to their positions.

Everyone knows everything about everybody. As you speak with them, an intricate web starts forming, one in which anything could happen: the crazy lady was married to the rich guy, the twenty-something kid has four children in other countries, the youngest of the family of Buddhists has turned out to be a bodybuilder.

There is a clear separation between the upper part of the valley and the lowest area, closest to the ravine. The upper valley adheres to a certain order, a kind of happy-family canonic law with a tranquil, organized system. The lower zone that looks over the precipice is wild and inhabited by lost children who have become adults.

To cross the border between the parts of the valley, you must travel through the "enchanted forest." It's the ravine, coursing with a river of icy water. The native trees that survived the fire of '86 grow alongside creeping plants and bushes introduced by

the people who live there, giving the forest the appearance of an immense and abandoned jungle garden.

I live between these two parts, just before the enchanted forest. Sometimes I take a cold bath, put on clean clothes, and sit to write in front of the window with a clear head. Other times, I get drunk at somebody's birthday party. I usually drink wine that I bring myself, while the others, most of them abstemious, smoke joints and take speed. I've woken at dawn in the ravine, half dead, more than once. I make my way home, puking on every other tree, crawling on all fours up the slight incline. My house is beautiful and filled with light, full of overlaid rugs, with its ceiling of beams and reeds, like in a storybook. It contains three chests, six windows, and two ghosts.

Near the middle of the valley, there is a big, ramshackle house, abandoned beneath two palm trees. It doesn't appear to have been destroyed by the pacific decline with which nature goes about consuming objects, but as if by a sudden force. It's Marino's house.

Marino doesn't live here anymore. I've been told a lot about him, but I only saw him once, in the village tavern. I'd guess he was about sixty. He looked like a wiry scoundrel, in his jeans and black T-shirt with a tiny hole was worn through at the chest. A gold safety pin struggled to close the tear. We had something like a short conversation. In a rough voice, he bid me farewell:

"May you be very happy and have sons with beards."

The land on which the house sat had belonged to his wife. When they separated, she moved to the village and he stayed on, building that imposing shack with his own two hands, day by day. Wooden arches, a porch, rooms with two floors, a tiled pool. He lived in solitude, building the house, tattered and taciturn. He hardly ate. A piece of ham, sometimes; a few

figs from a nearby tree. He slept outside next to the orchard, in a sleeping bag, so the wild boars wouldn't rip up what he had planted. If you heard a rough, insistent scraping in the middle of the night, it was Marino, who couldn't sleep and was sanding the porch railing.

At some point, his ex-wife filed a police report to get him off the property. The cops who came around to evict him got covered in mud and caught in thorns as they made their way down the trail to the house. When the police came to accuse me of having eaten a baby, there was a moment when I looked at them and wondered if the same thugs would always be sent to our valley to get lost on the goat paths, terrified of us—the people who live in homes that look like monstrous dumps.

Marino asked for time to pack up and leave. They gave him two days. All he had was a backpack with a pair of pants and a packet of Príncipe cookies.

The night before he left, he took a hammer to the house and destroyed it all. The whole valley echoed with the sound of the blows.

Some things are hard for me to write. It's almost like wrecking, in one night, the house you've been building for years. You suddenly realize that the house you're working on is only worth something if you break it and leave the pieces exposed, wreckage for all to see.

Legal documents say the house belongs to the ex-wife. Everyone calls it "Marino's house."

The first time I entered the ruins, I thought of a natural catastrophe. In vandalism, in dinosaurs.

On the lower part of the wall, written in pencil, in very small handwriting, I read: *Life ruins everything but thats the way it is and you have to asept it.*

Juan Gómez Bárcena

Santander, 1984

Juan Gómez Bárcena holds a degree in Literary Theory and Comparative Literature, History and Philosophy. *Los que duermen* (Sexto Piso, 2019) was chosen by *El Cultural* as one of the best first works of the year. In 2014 he published *El cielo de Lima* (Salto de Página), which received the 2014 Premio Ojo Crítico de Narrativa. His last novel, *Kanada* (Sexto Piso, 2017), was awarded with the Premio de las Letras Ciudad de Santander, the 2017 Premio Cálamo "Otra Mirada", and was a finalist for the 2017 Premio Tigre Juan.

When and why did you start writing?

It was 1991; I was six years old and the newspaper *Diario 16* started a series of collectibles called "Chronicle of Humanity." Since my parents didn't want to buy it, I decided to write those chronicles myself, scribbling with more imagination than rigor in nine school notebooks. My parents didn't buy me "Chronicle of Humanity," but they did have the foresight to save those nine notebooks. They still have them today.

What themes are you concerned with?

Time is the essential theme in my work. But if we must believe Rulfo's affirmation that there are only three themes in literature—love, life, and death—I suppose that this means that, in the end, my real theme is death.

Who are some of your favorite writers and influences?

Jorge Luis Borges has had the most influence on my work, although other writers have also been important, such at Cortázar, Rulfo, Bolaño, Salinger, Cheever, and John Fante.

As a fiction writer, what are some trends you have seen in recently published books? Which ones do you find most interesting?

I think among my generation of writers there are at least three notable trends, which aren't necessarily exclusive: autofictional texts that generally revolve around the question of identity, texts which belong to what Javier Calvo called "new strange literature," and texts that reflect on political and social questions. If I had to situate myself in any of the three, I'd place myself in this last category.

If you could have been a writer in another place and time, when and where would you choose?

I'm afraid that if I were given the privilege of changing country and century on a whim, I would also give in to the temptation of changing my profession.

Are you currently working on any new projects? If so, what are they?

For years now, I have been researching the parish and legal books and notary files from the tiny Cantabrian village Toñanes, and reconstructing the lives of its inhabitants over the last four hundred years. My future novel starts from these efforts at documentation, and will go in some direction that I can't quite define yet.

SYNOPSIS

The conquest of Mexico has ended, and Juan de Toñanes is just like the other gloriless soldiers without glory wandering like beggars through the land they helped subdue. When he receives one last mission, to hunt down a renegade Indian known as the Father who is preaching a dangerous heresy, Juan knows this may be his last chance to carve out the future he's always dreamed of. Deep in the unexplored territories of the North, he comes to believe that the man he pursues may be a prophet destined to transform his own time, and perhaps the future.

Ni siquiera los muertos is the story of a chase that transcends territories and centuries; a path pointing northward, always northward, that is to say, always towards the future, on a hallucinating journey from sixteenth 16th -century New Spain to today's Trump border wall. Conquistadors of old on horseback and migrants riding the roofs of the Beast, rebellious Indians and peasants waiting patiently for a better world, Mexican revolutionaries who take up their rifles and women murdered in the desert of Ciudad Juárez, all pass through this story, sharing the same landscape and the same hope: hope for the arrival of the Father who will bring justice to the oppressed.

NI SIQUIERA LOS MUERTOS

(From *Ni siquiera los muertos* / Not Even the Dead)

The first name put forward is that of *capitán* Diego de Villegas, a man with proven experience in such compromising situations, but Captain Villegas is dead. Someone suggests a certain Suárez from Plasencia, known for his more than fifteen exemplary expeditions, but it turns out Suárez is dead, too. No one mentions Nicolás de Obregón, given that P'urhepecha savages shot him through with arrows, nor Antonio de Oña, who committed innumerable atrocities against the pagan Indians, to later be ordained as a priest to protect said pagans. A measure of enthusiasm momentarily surfaces around the name Pedro Gómez de Carandía, but someone remembers that Pedro finally received *la encomienda* the previous year, sheathing his sword and taking up the whip. Pablo de Herrera is imprisoned by order of the governor, the result of certain tithes never having been paid, or paid twice, depending on the version; Luis Velasco went mad dreaming about the gold of the Seven Cities. Without Indians to kill, Domingo de Cóbreces returned to his previous occupation as a pig-herd. Alonso Bernardo de Quirós did everything he could to obtain the viceroy's favor on the battlefields of New Galicia, la Gran Chichimeca, and la Florida, and then turned up hanged in his own house, clutching

a final letter addressed to the viceroy in his right hand. No one doubts either the perseverance or skill of Diego Ruiloba, but neither do they doubt the tepidness of his faith, reason enough to discard him from the command of this sensitive situation. To arrive at the right name, they'll have to dig deep down in the pile of scrolls, grapple with an abundance of human weakness and failures, pass from captains to cavalry sergeants and from cavalry sergeants to simple soldiers of fortune; a path paved with men who were too old or who had returned to Castilla, mutilated men, rebellious men, men tried by the Holy Office of the Inquisition, men disfigured by syphilis, dead men. Until suddenly—perhaps to save himself the effort of dusting off more dockets and files—one of the clerks thinks to suggest the name of a certain Juan de Toñanes, former soldier of His Majesty the King, former treasure hunter, former almost everything. The clerk has never met him personally, but Juan de Toñanes is said to have evaded poverty by pursuing fugitive Indians escaped from the *encomiendas* of Puebla. A humble man, unworthy, perhaps, of the enterprise at hand, but with a reputation as a competent man and good Christian, endowed with an almost miraculous ability to always return with the Indian in question, shackled and in one piece. *God strike me down*, the clerk continues, *if this occupation isn't the selfsame enterprise Your Excellencies need someone for; a mission that, excepting of the obvious differences, consists precisely in* locating a specific Indian and bringing him back, dead or alive. The clerk falls silent, and the viceroy, who has also begun to lose his patience with the search, orders the clerk to review his papers for news of this Juan de Toñanes person. He finds nothing more than a thin, moldy file, from which they can deduce that, in his soldiering days, Juan was neither the best or the worst of the bunch; that he bled in many small skirmishes without distinguishing himself in any of them, neither for cowardice or bravery; that for years

he sent letters to the viceroy requesting—unsuccessfully—to be granted an *encomienda*; that later he begged—dripping in deference—for a sergeant's appointment in the expedition from Coronado to la Quivira; that lastly, he had appealed—receiving no response—for a post in Castilla far below his merits. To all appearances, Juan de Toñanes was a common man, but of the most uncommon kind, given that in all these years he had managed not to defend heresies, engage in duels, take part in brawls or scandals, curse God or His Majesty the King, stain the reputations of maidens, or find himself deserving of prison or ignominy. Before the clerk had even finished reading the record of service in his hand, the viceroy had already decided to suspend the search and summon this Juan de Toñanes of unknown talent and skill, but of whom, like any Spanish soldier, a certain facility with the sword and at least a moderate taste for adventure could be expected.

Two raps of the doorknocker wake the dog and the dog's barks wake the woman dozing beside the hearth. In one corner of the tavern, four men linger still, unsteady from drink. They exchange cards in silence by the light of a single candle, indifferent to the knocks at the door and the hammering of the rain on the roof and the sound of the five leaks that drip intermittently from the ceiling into five tin cauldrons. One of the cauldrons is already overflowing, leaving a puddle the dirt floor doesn't manage to absorb. It should have been emptied hours ago, the woman might have time to think as she lights the oil lamp and goes to answer to the door.

Two men wait in the hall, sheltered under their capes and sombreros. As soon as the woman has turned the key in the lock, they burst into the tavern, stomping their soaking wet boots on the threshold. One of them curses under his breath; it is unclear if he directs his profanity at the storm, at the night that has caught them unawares in this remote corner of the

world, or at the dark-complexioned woman who helps them shrug off their wet over-clothes. Their capes appear waxed by the rain and when they remove their hats the last drops spill onto the floor. Only once she has hung their hats and ponchos does the woman have a chance to observe the men by the lamplight. She sees their eyes and pale skin and coppery beards, she sees the fine shirts they wear, the belts made of thin leather straps, and she sees, above all, their very white hands, clean and surely soft, hands made for the brush of scrolls or silk and never, ever, for working the land. The strangers do not return the woman's gaze, they don't take any notice of her, or if they do, they avoid her just as they avoid the attentions of the dog sniffing their riding pants and leather boots.

At the back of the tavern, the four men lift their eyes from their cards and jugs of pulque. The whiteness of the newcomers' skin is so extraordinary that the men swivel their heads, called to attention by the sudden surprise. They are, without a doubt, Spaniards, men of the court perchance, the viceroy's clerks or bureaucrats, and once free of their capes and hats they stroll through the tavern slowly and with aplomb.

The strangers finally select a table, most likely the cleanest in the tavern, but still the woman rushes to scrub at it with a damp rag. Meanwhile, she recites the lists of dishes with which it would be a pleasure to serve *vuesas mercedes*, your noble sirs. The house-baked bread your Excellencies must try. The two well-ventilated rooms available in which, should your Graces so desire, they can spend the night. She refers to them in this way, indiscriminately, vuesas mercedes, your Excellencies, your Graces, trusting that one of the forms of the address will be appropriate for the strangers' status. But the strangers don't want food or lodgings. Just drink. Just two cups of wine. The woman stutters, informing them that, unfortunately, they have no wine left. They ask for aguardiente, and there is no

aguardiente, either. One of the men turns and points to the men playing cards:

"What are they drinking?"

"Pulque, your Excellency . . . this humble tavern only serves pulque, your Grace . . . a drink unworthy of your noble palate, sir . . ."

"Pulque, then," the other pronounces.

As they wait, the strangers return to their judgment of their surroundings. They look at the woman, obviously an Indian, as she enters the galley kitchen to fill their bowls of pulque. They look at the card players at the next table, undoubtedly Indians as well. They observe their callused, dirty hands, their brown skin, their worn clothes, until the Indians in question—unable to withstand the strangers' gaze another instant—return, hang-dog, to their game. The players seem confused; they have forgotten whose stake it was. The strangers are satisfied by their discomfort. They look then at the cauldrons strewn randomly on the floor. The hearth. The poorly patched ceiling from which hangs a string of chile peppers and two rather scrawny, unplucked turkeys. A barrel sawn in half to make a seat and a door off its hinges to serve as a table. The row of dirty pulque bowls on the tabletop and the simple wooden cross on the opposite wall, hung out of conviction or fear, who knows which, like the hams hung by Jews in their shop windows in Castilla. In some places, the floor is adorned with a patchwork of round fieldstone, which become ever more scarce as one advances toward the back of the tavern, giving way to a simple floor of packed earth, as if someone had once attempted to improve the place but eventually ran out of either gold or hope. On its mat by the fireplace, the dog sighs sorrowfully, deep in slumber, subjected, surely, to nightmares.

The woman returns with two jugs of pulque and a plate of fried tortillas no one has asked for. On the rim of one of the jugs,

white marks from of a pair of lips are clearly visible. The men stare at the stain, as if willing it to be erased.

Before she leaves them, the woman bends to perform a complicated curtsy, but one of the men grabs her wrist. There is no violence in his gesture. Just unobjectionable authority, to which she submits with resignation.

"We're also looking for a man," he says, and the woman prepares herself to listen.

They seek the owner of the tavern, and at the foot of the stairs leading to the bedrooms, he finally appears. The strangers observe his approach and don't move an inch. They do not stand to receive him. They do not extend their hand in greeting. They don't do, or say, anything. They remain in their chairs, and from their positions judge the man that makes his way toward them, swaying, barely managing to avoid the cauldrons into which the raindrops splash. He looks to be forty or forty-five years old and still has all, or almost all, of his teeth. They look at his messy hair and untidy beard. The blurry eyes. The poorly-buttoned shirt. He is, perhaps, a man just out of bed, spurred to action by the woman's call, someone who has reached the age when it is customary practice to turn in early. He is, perhaps, simply a drunk. They prefer to believe the second option: alcohol has always been an excellent companion for difficult enterprises. At least for a certain class of enterprise and certain class of men.

An empty chair sits at the table. Wordlessly, one of the men points. It's the same imperious hand that held the woman's wrist; now it pulls the recent arrival over to the chair without the need to touch him.

"You are Juan de Toñanes."

It doesn't sound like a question but a statement, and it takes the tavern owner a moment to answer. He is able to think many things in that span of time. He looks at the

untouched tortillas and the *jícaras* of pulque, filled to the brim, and the two strangers who have not deigned to take a single bite or sip. The one who spoke holds his gaze, as if he expects to read a reply in his eyes. The second stranger doesn't even bother to look up. He has taken a small knife from his belt, a gold-handled dagger that wasn't made to wage war but rather to open wax seals or slit the pages of uncut books. He dedicates himself to shaping his fingernails, which are otherwise trimmed and pristine. .

"Yes, I am Juan de Toñanes," Juan de Toñanes replies.

And then, attempting nonchalance:

"What I am accused of?"

"What's that you say?"

"Isn't that why *vuesas mercedes* are here? To apprehend me?"

The stranger lets out a long laugh. He laughs so long that his companion has time to finish his left hand and begin on the right. No, not at all: the higher ups are very satisfied with Juan. If only he could have been in the palace to hear the clerks and the governor and even the viceroy himself speak of his feats. That is precisely why they have come: to thank him for the service he has rendered to the Crown, a service noted and recognized by all. And to take advantage of his generosity, perhaps, and request his assistance once more. That is why they have come so far. And he shouldn't have any illusions that finding him had been an easy task, no. If he knew how many dusty roads, how many towns both large and small, how many leagues they had to deviate from the Royal Road until they found this godforsaken tavern.

"My assistance?" Juan asks, as if it was impossible to believe that his coarse, scar-hardened hands could be of use to anyone. "I regret to tell you, noble sirs, that it has been a long time since I set out on adventures and campaigns."

The man laughs again. He points to the untouched pulque.

"Well, we certainly haven't come for your wine."

He waves his hand in a vague gesture that encompasses the whole of the tavern. The woman, busying herself in the little kitchen, and the four card players, who still appear to be playing although they haven't taken their eyes off the strangers.

"This can be different. The Spanish, as you know, don't go where there is wine, but where there is gold to purchase it."

As he speaks, the stranger unhooks from his belt a wineskin glistening with raindrops. He hands it to Juan companionably. Juan holds it for a moment, unsure whether to raise it to his lips or return it to the stranger.

"Come, drink. You're Spanish yourself. You know how to appreciate good wine."

At last Juan takes a long, thorough swig. The wine is delicious: it bears no the hint of the stunted vineyards of América, but the rich taste of the faraway wineries of Castilla. When he finishes, Juan wipes his beard with his sleeve and offers the wineskin to the second stranger, perhaps because he thinks the man must be thirsty, or to save him from his abstraction. The stranger doesn't appear to register the offer. He continues to fiddle with the little dagger, removed from all that is being said or done at that table.

"Well then, what would the viceroy have me do?" Juan dares to say, emboldened by the wine.

The man starts. The dagger stops moving for an instant, as if someone had said or done something inappropriate. The other speaks first, attempting to expunge Juan's words. Who said such a thing? Has he, or his companion, perchance, made any reference to the viceroy himself asking for something, needing something? Is he insinuating that the viceroy is a beggar who requests charity from his subjects? The viceroy, Juan must know, asks nothing of him. Nothing at all. They

are simply relaying an invitation. A mission, he could call it, if it weren't for the fact that the mission will never appear in any records, or in anybody's memory, nor is anyone ordering or financing it. It is not actually a mission: that must be made clear. But on the other hand, if he completes it, the viceroy will heap riches upon him. One could say that it *is* a mission if completed, and that it *isn't* one if—God forbid—it should fail. But even if successful, it couldn't be called a mission in the strict sense of the word, because completed missions are boasted of in taverns and in ports and in palace corridors and fortresses, and Juan could never speak of these affairs, no matter the number and class of men who inquired. Not even in the confessional. Because if God already knows everything we do, why bother repeating it, and if He doesn't know, what are we referring to as God? Doesn't he agree?

Juan nods. Yes, he says, he agrees, unsure why he is nodding or with what he agrees. His answer seems to satisfy the strangers. The first continues to speak, more calmly now, and the other returns to tending his nails. The blade shines between his fingers in the firelight, as if he were holding a tiny sun. Anyway, his companion is saying, with these questions clarified and the issue perfectly understood, we can, for the sake of simplification and instruction, call the mission a mission. And we can even say that it is the viceroy who is ordering it, although that would be an exaggeration, almost a lie, really. And what the viceroy wants, if the viceroy were to want something, is very simple, he says, laughing again. It is so uncomplicated for a man with your experience that it almost makes one, well, laugh. You just have to find a particular Indian, somewhere in the Gran Chichimeca. Find him and end his rule, he explains, because it has to be admitted that the Indian has recently gained a measure of prestige among the savages. You know that's what the Gran Chichimeca is,

a savage place, and as enormous as its name suggests. You know that it's a wild territory, capable of causing the swords of less worthy, less valiant men to tremble: a place even feared by the Aztecs, so bloodthirsty themselves. It wouldn't escape the notice of a knowledgeable man like Juan that in Náhuatl the word *chichimeca* means "dirty and uncivilized dog," he explains. But he also must know that someone who, as a boy, took part in the siege of México-Tenochtitlan; someone who pledged his sword to Cristóbal de Olid in the Hibueras and to Nuño de Guzmán in the conquest of New Galicia; someone who made such good slaves of so many on the fields of battle, isn't afraid of the Gran Chichimeca, or anything else.

Juan doesn't respond at first. He listens in silence and with a certain distance, as if the events being related weren't from his very own life, as if they belonged to another man's past. In some ways, this is the truth: everything the stranger has recounted seems to have happened to another person. It is difficult to see a soldier in Juan, imagine him with a helmet and musket, with his own horse and own spoils of war. One couldn't be faulted for imagining that he had been there forever, serving bowls of pulque and corn tortillas in a tavern rotting slowly at the edge of the world.

"The Indian . . . is he *chichimeca*?" Juan asks, attempting a soldierly tone.

"No. He's from this area. Tlaxcalteca, I believe."

Juan shakes his head. He reaches to tear off a piece of cold tortilla and put it in his mouth, as if the mention of war has brought back his appetite, or courage.

"Then your work is done."

"What do you mean?"

"There is only one thing the *chichimeca* hate more than a Christian, and that's the *tlaxcaltec*. You can presume your Indian is dead."

The second stranger looks up suddenly from his hands and dagger. His eyes are blue and they are dead, or the closest thing to death that Juan remembers. They are eyes that have only contemplated horror once it has already been transformed into figures, memorials, files. Eyes that have seen no more bloodshed than the red speck on a poorly-shaved neck, and perhaps this is why this man has grown tired of demanding the blood of others from behind his clerkship, without understanding what it is he demands.

"Not this Indian," he says, and his voice is so hard, so weighty, that it is proof enough.

No one speaks for some time. The stranger has turned his focus back to his dagger and his spotless nails and the other is staring at Juan, waiting. The only sound is the slap of the cards on the table behind him, the plink of water on water, the din the woman makes with crockery and pots in the kitchen galley, despite the fact there is nothing left to be cleaned.

"What has this Indian done that so concerns *vuesas mercedes*? Taken a maiden by force? Burnt a church? Came for the throat of the viceroy himself?"

The first stranger shakes his head, a faint smile still on his lips. He says the reasons are not important. He says they are not going to give him those reasons but that instead they have a thousand golden reasons to give the man who finds him, every one of them stamped with the depiction of King Juan Carlos, God save him. He says the gold comes from high up and so do the orders and the higher ups are never mistaken, and if they are, then they—those below, that is—are never the wiser. Therefore, if Juan wants to accept the mission, the mission that strictly speaking isn't a mission, ordered by no one, he will have to forget about explanations and settle for the gold. And the gold, he adds, encouraged by the renewed attention with which

Juan looks at him, is capable of things many men wouldn't believe. Enough doubloons can turn the most ramshackle tavern into a prosperous one; a stop along the royal road, even; with fresh horses and abundant wine and Christian customers; no leaky roofs and no Indian maids behind the counter, but good Castilian girls to serve drink without shame or disgrace.

For a few moments, Juan watches the mouth that has just issued those words.

"That woman is not a maid," he says. "She's my wife."

A heavy pause.

"I've already told *vuesas mercedes* that I was finished catching Indians a long time ago."

His voice would like to command respect, but only begs forgiveness.

"I understand," the second stranger says, sheathing his dagger.

The men rise slowly to their feet, as though they want to give Juan time to regret his decision. But Juan doesn't regret it, and if he does, he doesn't dare say so. He stands, too. He does it slowly, with difficulty, perhaps to imitate their movements, perhaps because so many years of experience with the sword weren't in vain.

Before he makes for the door, the second stranger turns his blue eyes on Juan. They will be in the village for three days, he says. Not an hour more. He has until then to change his mind. He says this as he roots around in the pouch at his waist. It looks like he might be about to shake Juan's hand, but he doesn't. Instead, he takes out a coin and tosses it in a contemptuous arc. A coin that is no more than a flash of gold passing through the air before vanishing with a white splash into a jug of pulque.

The woman catches up to them at the door. She helps the strangers into their capes and hats, now dry or almost

dry from the warmth of the fire. Juan thinks he catches a particular glint in the way the men look at his wife. A look that in some ways resembles how they had looked at the bowls of pulque. The corn tortillas. The five leaks in the ceiling, ringing in the depths of the five tin cauldrons.

Aixa de la Cruz

Bilbao, 1988

Aixa de la Cruz earned her PhD in Literary Theory and Comparative Literature. She has published the novels *De música ligera* (451 Editores, 2009) and *La línea del frente* (Salto de Página, 2017), the short story collection *Modelos animals* (Salto de Página, 2015), and the essay *Diccionario en Guerra* (La Caja Books, 2018). *Cambiar de idea* (Caballo de Troya, 2019) is her most recent book. She writes monthly on feminism and gender in the *Periódico Bilbao* and bimonthly in *La Marea*.

When and why did you start writing?

I always remember writing. At the age of five, I illustrated a story on a few folded pieces of paper that intended to be a book, with a cover and everything. My teacher, really proud, showed me off like in a travelling zoo through the older kids' classrooms and I've always thought, somewhat embarrassed, that my calling comes from that moment, the earliest applause I got in my life.

What themes are you concerned with?

With time I've turned into what I most feared: a political writer. I thought that literature had to remain in the symbolic margins (maybe there is still a part of me that believes that), but I am more and more interested in the struggle on the ground, and the themes that are not universal or eternal, but urgent all the same.

Who are some of your favorite writers and influences?

The truth is that I've stopped reading almost all of the writers I venerated during my late teenage years: Roberto Bolaño, Javier Marías, Enrique Vila-Matas . . . Someone I discovered at that time and who I've never taken off the pedestal is Antonio Orejudo. I had barely even heard of the the women who would re-educate me years later: Siri Husvedt, Paul B. Preciado, Doris Lessing, Belén Gopegui . . .

As a fiction writer, what are some trends you have seen in recently published books? Which ones do you find most interesting?

In short fiction, the break from traditional forms and, in general, texts that borrow from different genres and challenge classical structure: intimate diaries that incorporate a philosophical disseration, short story collections that include political manifestos, books of poetry that function as memoir . . .

If you could have been a writer in another place and time, when and where would you choose?

A French theorist in the seventies.

Are you currently working on any new projects? If so, what are they?

Having a daughter has taken away my interest in writing (for the moment). That compulsion to create, the need to produce, vanished, because I felt like I already had.

SYNOPSIS

Cambiar de idea is a hybrid text in which the author moves between memoir and essay as she explores the various milestones in her life that, on the cusp of turning thirty, have led her to rethink her views. In this book, growing up is learning to contemplate the pain of others head on, without trying to take refuge behind theory; it is developing political consciousness; and above all, a fight and reconciliation with feminism. Because women aren't born aware of the oppression they face for the mere fact of being women, the author shows the perverse way in which misogyny conditions all of us by telling us how we have been victims and victimizers. In the same chapter, she narrowly escapes a sexual assault and confesses the dynamics of an assault she carried out in her homosexual relationships. The objective is to achieve an extreme transparency, uncomfortable for the one writing, in which the reader can feel both reflected and questions. Written in 2017 in the early days of the #MeToo movement, this book has a lot to do with the testimonies of those that aspire to build a ripple effect that invites readers to change their own minds.

CAMBIAR DE IDEA

(From *Cambiar de idea* / Changing My Mind)

When I got to Granada, I was already over the shock phase. I wasn't a beginner. Moreover, I now had in my possession the means for making life a party. I didn't have to kneel in bar bathrooms anymore. I had my own room and my own bed. I went to classes on cultural materialism and feminist theory and gender studies and acquired a framework that would lend transcendence to whatever I got up to at night. I dressed up as a madwoman in the attic for Halloween; during carnival, after we'd studied Judith Butler's performance theory, I wore a tight dress, spike heels, and a sign around my neck that said: woman. Dressing up as an object was the same thing as being an object, but with ironic distance. The lines to get into the popular clubs got shorter, waiters served you right away—with a smile—even bureaucratic processes were sped up. The fact that I was so used to male attention that I snubbed it was nothing to be ashamed of. I confused lesbianism with my love for a challenge. Although I never used that label. Sexual orientation was a spectrum and I was moving toward the pole opposite the one I'd started from. The pole of departure was never *real*. I had been raised within a binding heterosexual framework that had conditioned and limited my transition to adulthood, but now, at last, I was free.

One night—early morning, actually—I met Milena. I was with Lisa and Laura, two friends from my masters program, at one of the trendy dance clubs downtown, and we had some molly. It was a weeknight and the dance floor was practically empty. I noticed a girl with her hands in the air, dancing in circles to a beat that didn't come from the music playing in the club, but from whatever was playing in her head, and I guessed we were probably high on the same thing. She was with five guys dressed like she was, huge sweatshirts and sneakers. Her masculine get up was kind of sexy, like she had just been fucking and had thrown on her boyfriend's clothes, although it didn't look like she was with any of them. Good vibes. Rule number one is that they aren't surrounded by women. I had just been explaining this to Laura in line for the bathroom: if they're straight, it works at the end of the night, especially if they think they're beautiful and have gone off with some idiot and lost their friends at the last club. They know that unless there's a miracle, they're going to end up in bed with the most annoying guy in the group they've ended up with, that they'll do it for exercise, for something to do, probably as a favor. If you go over to them, they always think you want to steal one of the male simians. The girls are aware that they're simians, but they still feel threatened, they can't help it. And then comes the kicker, when they realize you don't want to hook up with the guys, but with *them*. If they're still partying, if they're yawning but haven't gone home yet, it's because they still hope something exciting could happen, and this is exciting, exotic, what they were waiting for.

When I approached Milena and swallowed her up with my toxic pupils, I knew that she didn't fit the profile I had detailed for Laura, but even so I moved in with the usual method. Where are your friends? She pointed to the guys hanging around her, who were now jumping up and down in time to a Rammstein song. She told me that she was out that night with her housemates, and shrugged. She was eighteen and from a town in Jaén. She was on

speed and absinthe, not ecstasy. She had only been in Granada a little while, she studied Fine Arts and took pictures of helium balloons—heart or cartoon-shaped ones—when they landed in industrial sites or dumpsters after kids let them go. As she spoke, I stared at her lower lip, so thick it creased in the middle, and pulled her slowly off the dance floor and over to the wall, and when she was against it, I slowly closed the space between us, stroking her hair. I like your hair, it's really soft, like sand, and we started getting looks. We had twenty pairs of eyes on us, the eyes of men who jacked off to lesbian porn, so I suggested we go outside to smoke. We held hands so we wouldn't lose each other in the crowd around the bar. I went first, finding gaps and clearing a path, exaggerating how packed it was so we would rub against each other, and I felt like if it went on much longer I was going to get off right there, from the heat I felt at my back and knew was hers. Drugs never sat so well with me again.

Outside, Milena's cheeks were slick with sweat and the little droplets sparkled like glitter under the neon lights at the door. I put my arm around her waist, pulled her to me, and sucked that lower lip that looked like it was about to burst. She didn't kiss me back, but she didn't pull away, either.

Not here. Let's go to my place.

The sun was rising as we walked and I was getting tired, so I took out the gram of molly and we shared the leftover crystals.

This reminds me of that candy powder I used to have when I was a kid, she said, but that was sour and sweet and this is just bitter. Do you remember those little packets? And those chocolate cigarettes. We weren't allowed to have those.

We were walking down an empty alley with views of the Darro river. The whitewashed walls of the Realejo quarter reflected light like a divine apparition and we were totally entranced. I wanted to say something but I couldn't remember what, and that's when her housemates showed up.

At first, I didn't care that they harassed me with questions and pulled me away from Milena, that they catcalled and encrouched pretty grievously on my personal space, but then one of them went too far: he grabbed me and tried to forcibly kiss me, and despite the serotonin injection circulating in my system, usually allowing me to make peace in hell, I lost my patience and started shouting.

Let's get something straight, I think you guys have it all wrong. I'm here with her.

I slapped at the air and managed to hit the shortest guy on the face. He jumped back and exclaimed vindictively:

She's not even a dyke, she's just a slut.

I sped up and met Milena, who had hung back and was walking along the edge of the curb on her tiptoes, like a tightrope walker. I was a gymnast when I was little, she explained with a big smile. And then: let's take a selfie. You're so pretty. Tomorrow I can tell my friends that I met an actress or something and they'll totally believe it. That made me laugh and she wobbled. I held her so she wouldn't fall, felt her breasts against mine, and instantly forgot all about the harassers. I nibbled that inflated lip and she didn't resist and everything went back to being mystical and perfect.

I need to take your clothes off *right now.*

She pointed to the building at the end of the street and said it was where she lived, that her housemates were already inside, and it was true because now we were alone again in that corner of the Realejo. We started running and reached the doorway in a matter of seconds. She unlocked the door and I took her arm and pulled her into the elevator. I was on drugs but I wasn't crazy. I refused to cross the threshold of that potential rapists' den, so we'd have to make do with the elevator's coffin-sized dimensions. I took off her sweatshirt and saw her narrow little body, a girl's body, and two round tits that weren't girl-like and I turned her around sharply, as if I didn't want to see any more. I faced her against the wall, unzipped her pants and started stroking her from behind, over

her underwear, with both hands. When her panties were damp, I moved the fabric aside and slipped into her, almost without meaning to. Milena moved her hips so my fingers could reach where they weren't reaching, rubbing against me as she did, and that was enough for me to come, fully clothed, in under five minutes. After that miraculous occurrence, when she told me that she could never get off standing up, that she needed to lie down, I couldn't not go to her room. She took my fingers from her pussy and put them in my mouth. What was I going to say? She pushed the button for the third floor and I went along for the ride.

If we're lucky, they'll already be in bed, she whispered, and all seemed calm from the apartment doorway. We still took off our shoes and tiptoed down the hall. Her walls were papered in pictures and posters of Ariana Grande. I don't like feeling like I'm being watched, but I'm also not the superstitious type, so we laid down and I started fingering her again. I tried to unhook her bra with my free hand at the same time. I couldn't get it at first but I kept trying; my ex-husband had always been able to do it on the first try and how could a man possibly have a better hang of those hooks than me and I guess I got distracted from the task at hand, I missed the mark and was so rough that Milena cried out, not a loud cry but loud enough to be heard through the walls. A stern fatherly voice started calling her name. She leapt out of bed and threw on her clothes and disappeared down the dark hallway. I heard a far off bang, something bouncing off the floor. I guessed that she must have tripped and I waited in bed, practicing with the clasps on my bra. Nope. Couldn't unhook it with just one hand. My perception of time was fluid and I didn't know if seconds or minutes passed before Milena came back, but she burst into the room a mess, her face red from crying, red and swollen like one of her balloons.

Stop fucking up my fucking life! Just stop fucking up my fucking life, all of you!

It took me a few seconds to realize she wasn't shouting at me. She was talking to the wall.

I approached her as one approaches a dangerous animal, with caution, and ran my fingers down her back. She shook in a way that made me think she'd been hurt.

You're still here! Thank you!

She buried her face between my breasts, staining my skin with mucus and tears that would dry into a kind of crust. Then, between hiccups, she started talking to herself.

I thought things would be different from back home. But it's the same, the same, the same.

I sobered up immediately. I had been on my feet for twelve hours and I didn't know how to get back home. I'd have to call a cab. The night was over. I couldn't wring another drop from it. How much cash did I have in my wallet? I started gathering my stuff while Milena begged me to sleep over, she was afraid of being alone, she said. But all of us are alone and I don't even know you and I didn't come here to sleep. I gave her any excuse I could think of. The last time I saw her was from the doorway, a teenager hugging her pillow, vehemently sobbing in that way we don't actually cry over and I thought about how I was out of that phase, and how good that was, what a relief, how glad I was not to be her.

Six months later, as part of my farewell tour of Granada, I went back to the club where we'd met and found myself in a completely different ecosystem, saturated with cocktails with straws and kids in suits. There were no drugs that night, but I was plastered. Begging and sputtering and hitting on a classmate I'd barely spoken to all year because I turned red and stuttered in her presence. Marie was so beautiful and so straight and so obviously had a boyfriend that my hounding her was humiliating for both of us. I was obviously trying to hurt myself, slam my self-esteem into a brick wall, but she didn't deserve to be made my wall so I backed off, came to my senses and apologized, and left the club with an Italian guy

who had been sniffing around all night and who Marie thought was really good-looking. Maybe I'd feel better after fucking someone who had a better chance of fucking her than I did.

I hadn't kissed a man in a long time. I realized this on the flea-ridden couch in the student apartment where the Italian started to grope me. I also remembered that I never got off with guys I didn't know at all, but that night was a simple case of doing something just so I wouldn't have to say that I hadn't. We barely touched each other. He took off his clothes, I took off my clothes, he was on top, I was under him. He kissed me with exhausting intensity, love-in-wartime kissing. Put on a condom, I insisted, and touched his cock to motivate him. I don't have a condom, he replied. Okay. Well, arrivederci. I tried to sit up but he held my wrists. What the hell are you doing? He started jabbing randomly between my legs, trying hit the mark, but he wasn't very skillful: it was dark and neither one of us had the use of our arms. I clenched my teeth and struggled like we were locked in a wrestling match, but it wouldn't have mattered how often I worked out or how much he weighed, I was unquestionably inferior. The voice of my invisible enemy whispered in my ear: *So there are no determinate differences between men and women, eh? It's all just culture, right?* I screamed, not for help, but with rage and the exertion of a weight-lifting competition. Luckily, I woke his housemate who had stayed in that night. He called the Italian's name like a question, like he wanted to check that everything was okay, that there hadn't been a break-in. The Italian hesitated and I got free and ran. I grabbed my bag, dress, and shoes from the living room and went naked into the hallway. I got myself inside the elevator and, only then, put my clothes back on.

I didn't think about the parallels between my story and Milena's until several months had passed. Right then, my only thought was to get away, even though I wasn't really scared because I knew the guy wouldn't come after me. He wasn't a psycho

from a movie, just your garden-variety rapist. The next morning, he'd be telling his friends how he brought this crazy girl home, one of those girls who change their mind at the last minute and leave you with blue balls, the bitches. And since I wasn't afraid, I had a sense of humor about the fact that the building's main door was locked. I sent my location to Marie, who was still at the club, and she came to rescue me. She buzzed several of the neighbors, but nobody answered. It was five o'clock in the morning. We could see each other through the metal latticework on the door and communicate through WhatsApp. The situation was so absurd that I had to cover my mouth to keep from laughing. After half an hour, a garbage man came down the street and Marie explained our situation to him. He suggested we call the police. Before he left, he peered into the entryway to see my face, the face of the girl who'd had something so ridiculous happen to her, and noticed something both Marie and I had missed: a switch. A white switch on the lobby wall that would open the main door like an automatic doorman. The whole night had been about my pride, about ripping it to shreds, and that switch demolished it completely. I hugged Marie and made her promise that we would keep that final part of the story between us forever.

Of course, it had to be a man. You've got to be fucking kidding me.

I've told this story so many times that now the story is all I can remember. The story and Marie's dress, so on trend that summer when half of the twenty-somethings on the Iberian Peninsula were dressing like brides. White lace. When I concentrate on that night and try to determine which circle of hell it led to, I'm struck by the thought that Marie's dress is the key. That everything would be all right if I could go back and touch it. *Yeah, right.*

The next day, I got together with my friends and recounted my misadventure exactly as I've done here, sparing no detail except the bit about getting locked in the lobby. What I got in exchange was an accounting of sexual assaults that made me think

about my experience as a rite of passage in the female universe. They talked dispassionately, like they were remembering a time they were sick, or when they got their first period, and I had the sense they were implying that I was a woman because I'd been through that thing, which couldn't compete with Sonia and the harp teacher who tried to rape her in his car when she was twelve, not mention with Lucía, her purse stolen at knifepoint by some guy who—unsatisfied with his loot—then forced her on her knees, his dick in her face for a close-up view of him jacking off. He wanted to come on her face, but he missed and ejaculated on the wall. It dried into a crust there in the underground walkway she used every day to walk to school.

Those stories shocked me. They couldn't be the norm. In Mexico, maybe, but not Spain. Or, okay, maybe in Spain, but not the Basque Country. Euskadi was a civilized place and that's why the people who wanted independence were right: the limp had to be amputated to stop the gangrenous spread. Safe and sound back home in Bilbao, I could keep defending the ideological hodgepodge I'd extracted from Preciado and Butler, from the female writers that systematized what I had intuited since childhood, since that car ride, the last time I saw the man who passed his genes to me but still isn't my father: biological determinism doesn't exist, "woman" is a cultural construct, a club that differentiates and excludes based on arbitrary norms, a club I should feel a part of but don't. Simply having a pussy doesn't give anyone the right to speak in my name; I didn't sign up for membership, someone else put me on the list. When they raise the curtain at the end of the show, when the clown takes off her make-up, no difference remains except for the aches and pains of fighting an opponent from a higher weight class, an opponent who breaks the rules, but nobody ever said life was as noble as boxing. *Man up*. Girls are a bunch of crybabies, but there's no reason you have to be a girl.

Álex Chico

Plasencia, 1980

Álex Chico has published the novel-essays Los cuerpos partidos (Candaya, 2019) and *Un final para Benjamin Walter* (Candaya, 2017), finalist for the del Prix Européen de l'essai philosophique Walter Benjamin 2018, the book of interviews *Vivir enfrente (Nueve conversaciones)* (ERE, 2018), the notebook *Sesenta y cinco momentos en la vida de un escritor de posdatas* (La Isla de Siltolá, 2016), the essay *Un hombre espera* (Libros en su tinta, 2015) and the books of poetry *Habitación en W* (La Isla de Siltolá, 2014), Un lugar para nadie (De la luna libros, 2013), *Dimensión de la frontera* (La Isla de Siltolá, 2011), and *La tristeza del eco* (ERE, 2008). In 2016, the Chilean press Andesgraund published *Espacio en blanco*, an anthology of his poems from 2008-2014. In 2018 he received the Montserrat Roig fellowship. His poems have appeared in various anthologies (*España hoy: una mirada desde la poesía*, Ulrika Editores, Bogotá; *Punto de partida. Jóvenes poetas en España*, Universidad Autónoma de México, among others). He has published literary criticism in diverse media outlets, such as *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, *El Cuaderno*, *Revista de Letras*, and *Clarín*. He currently runs *Quimera* magazine.

When and why did you start writing?

At seventeen, which was a great age. For me, writing is a radical consequence of reading. This is why I started to write: to try to interiorize what I read even more deeply.

What themes are you concerned with?

Reflections on place, the way we communicate with it and how it conditions our identity. I'm interested in memory, the paths our lives take to find ourselves in a particular moment. And in language, of course, the impossibility of articulating in certain circumstances, as a mechanism that is sometimes not enough.

Who are some of your favorite writers and influences?

My early reading was of poetry, especially Portuguese poets, starting with Miguel Torga. For narrative, my favorite writers are Patrick Modiano and W. G. Sebald. I'm very interested in Polish literature, especially Zagajewski, Szymborska, and Tokarczuk. And other writers from here and there, like Carrère, Tavares, and Bufalino.

As a fiction writer, what are some trends you have seen in recently published books? Which ones do you find most interesting?

The best literature is being put forth in the books on the borders of genre, works that drink from all traditions and try not to fit in a fixed mold. We are living in a very interesting moment of the hybridization of genre, especially in essay, which has already moved away from the academic and is closer to biography or diary.

If you could have been a writer in another place and time, when and where would you choose?

In Barcelona in the seventies, or that same time in Mexico. It's cliched, but Paris in the 1920s.

Are you currently working on any new projects? If so, what are they?

The novel I'm working on now was born of meeting someone that was part of the Infrarealist group active in the Mexico City in the seventies, a period "literaturized" by Roberto Bolaño. The story explores issues that really interest me: the border between truth and verisimilitude, the scope of writing and the literary canon … and leads to a reflection on the key question: what are we prepared to do to complete the work we have before us.

SYNOPSIS

In September of 1940, a group of refugees left France via a secret route through the Pyrenees Mountains. They hoped to cross Spain and make their way to America, fleeing the barbarism that had seized Europe. Their first stop was a small village on the border, Portbou, a bay lost between hills and paths, and a key place on the long trek of exile. But not all managed to continue the journey. One of them, a stateless man without a nationality who the Spanish authorities renamed "Benjamin Walter," was found dead a few hours later.

Seventy-four years later, the narrator of this story decided to travel to Portbou with the intention of discovering what happened during Walter Benjamin's final hours. His initial investigation, however, branches out, giving way to new questions about this lost town and what has happened there, from the late nineteenth century to the present day.

Part essay, novel, diary, and travelogue, *An Ending for Benjamin Walter* lends itself a bi-directional reading, from Portbou to Walter Benjamin and vice versa, as well as a melancholy reflection on the past that questions the present, and on the difficult art of survival.

UN FINAL PARA BENJAMIN WALTER

(From *Un final para Benjamin Walter* /
An Ending for Benjamin Walter)

That's when you decide to spread out all the material on your desk. Everything you've accumulated: several notebooks, press clippings, books, slips of paper, postcards, brochures, catalogs, propaganda, photographs, folded sheets of paper, county maps, phone numbers, ideas shunted to the margins of the page. You try to assemble the pieces in order to decipher them like signs or signals: you know that if you look closely, a hidden nexus connects them. What you have before you is a work written in pieces, disjointed, built from scattered fragments, and even if you don't know how to order them, even if you can't make sense of this diffuse writing, you know that someone could. You know someone will manage to uncover them and give them new life. And that's enough for you. Edmond Jabès was right: whoever writes a book commits themselves to eternity. Even if they later throw it on the fire, someone will figure out how to piece together the ashes.

This is what you have in front of you: things scattered on the table and a few notes attempting to trace the dotted line that connects them. Like the keyboard on the laptop you are opening. You look at the spaces between the letters—

gaps zigzagging toward the edge of the screen—as if each space had a life of its own, an existence between the lines, a house with many rooms. A kind of refuge. Composed not of reality, but its representation.

As you make progress, adding words and paragraphs, layering on earlier drafts, earlier notes, the blank page takes on a new solidity: you are building something like a wall in hopes that other walls will slowly form, solid walls that will shelter you for weeks, maybe even years to come. It starts with a precise action: set one stone, then another. You don't dwell on how it will look, this thing that will take shape over the course of time. It's enough for you, the possibility that the stones will be sound and that you will have created a hypothesis with multiple directions, a house from which you could watch the horizon from the window. You tell yourself that you could live there, that you want to inhabit that space for a long time.

But then all you observe through that new window will cease to exist. Or will exist in some other way. You won't recognize what it was that you saw before. You'll stay in place while everything else moves. What do you think will happen inside you, if the streets change, if street corners no longer mean the meeting of two different roads, if the people walk slowly, as if dragging a heavy burden behind them? It will be as if the city was built solely for someone to lose themselves in. That someone must be you. Only you. Because you have been readying yourself with an idea: lose yourself in a city as one loses themselves in a forest. Everyone who is used to traveling alone in a strange city appreciates what the appearance of a known face means. The fear that seizes you when you enter places that have already been described and reproduced a thousand different ways. A figure standing on the edge of an abyss, on the border

that divides a world in decline from the world yet to come. Sometimes, as you know very well, a journey doesn't pull you toward the unknown, but rather spurs a return home. A journey that winds its way through lost time, where you can read the faces of those who cross your path, their jobs, their character, what lies beneath the mistrustful way they look at a person who appears to come down off the mountain. What they have inside shifts to the outside, their room becomes the street, like hallucinogenic substances or multidimensional spheres, like the Elysian fields or a kingdom of shadows: Blumeshof number 12, Steglitzstrasse-Genthinstrasse, Gare de Saint-Lazare, Tiergarten. Locked rooms that open to question what is happening next door. You remember an elderly Walt Whitman, sitting in front of the door, contemplating life. And you remember Kafka, too: I am standing on the threshold about to enter a room. It's a complicated business. And so you got lost in dark hallways, in labyrinths of houses that resembled consciousness during a sudden, shadowy realization. That is the point: uncovering the opacity that has managed to conceal itself behind a very bright light. Like three hesitant men who fear to reach the labyrinth's center and draw a new one, as they watch their neighbor's bedroom through the keyhole. None of you know a thing about him, yet his room is your world too. Like Simic's room: an empty bedroom and an open window. Something like memory.

That is why you ask yourself about your surroundings, their origin, their dates, what lies between the street and the interior. Why you've ended up there. It's the same haze that obscures the early stage of a photograph, the same vague impression that emerges for the first time in a workshop in Leipzig or Ghent, the grey stain creeping up toward a balcony, like the image from Niépce. A haze that doesn't

flatten the silence, but insolently demands to know who was there, who has been there all these years. And again, the need—or the obligation—arises to locate the invisible place where the future also resides. But what appears before you is so big, a chamber of sources so immeasurable, that your work must consist of making it smaller, reducing it in order to take in the whole. Those are the insubstantial links of a chain encircling a universal truth. A cosmic truth. Because every movement is an event, a drama. For this reason, you must remain attentive to what happens in the lapse of a single second, be attentive to the hand in motion, even though you don't know what it's going to do. The hand has to close its fingers, tense the knuckles, pull back to gain momentum before it can hit someone, before it can knock down another body. Before the hand ever makes contact, the course of its success or failure is already written. Your job is to identify the moment at which everything to come can be foreseen. The appearance of proximity. The precise moment that comes from the distance and—at the point of disappearing—opens up a new view. Its signs lead you all over the place; if you don't watch carefully, the signs will become invisible again, a sentence written in sand, on the verge of erasure. This is what it means to conceal: to leave a trace, but an invisible one, like the juggler Rastelli making things disappear in thin air.

That's when you will understand the hands' true purpose: the fist wasn't intended for hitting at all, but rather for conspiring with the vanishing object. They are hands that guide you and help you find what you believed couldn't be recovered. A word, a whisper, a pulse whose strength draws you to the cold vault of the past. The kind of sounds that unexpectedly return, huddled in the shadows of a life lived long ago. The sum of the echoes compelling you to notice

where to return for something that has been lost. In this way, you will better understand your present: through the answers provided by the past. You will be a death and you will be a rebirth. A memory so taut that it becomes a library riddled with quotations, impenetrable and enigmatic. A cave dug out of a mountain of manuscripts where you will go in search of a name you've left lying in some ditch along the way.

This is why you write: to make a record of an omission. You must confront this terrible paradox: the act of writing becomes the confirmation of an absence, the proof that something was lost along the way. You are nothing but a small cog in the long march toward oblivion. A miniature painting inside another painting. How to capture the remaining chapters before they hasten and disappear into the darkness of the ages? What can you hope from a language condemned to ruin if it cannot connect us through what it names? A language that dies because it cannot evoke the devastating entirety of another? Zurita was right: some things will never have access to language. Nevertheless, you are also aware that to speak is to invoke a story, to give a new opportunity to those who came before you. When you finally understand that some places are more than a mountain or insignificant side street, but the sum of all the looks that have beheld them, long before you ever did.

You wonder again how you can begin to synthesize these ways of looking, how to revive them if each perception in turn conceals a new root, like a tree migrating underground toward another, more distant tree. Everything is mixed together, and looking inside, one feels vertigo and fear. Those are the abysses of history. But would you not suffer the same tragedy as the blind woman before a mirror, like Orcagna's fresco in Pisa? So then, writing will consist of circling a pool

that suddenly fills with seaweed. A verdant layer concealing other experiences that resist being assimilated by a single person. Because that person will eventually grow accustomed to forgetting the things they really don't want to know. They will simply pretend not to know what is happening in order to save themselves from having to explain. You remember the man in Sebald's parable: the one who insists on telling it how it was and is killed by his audience for the deathly chill he spreads. This is why we prefer silence to reign over ruins, the same way we accept a pool full of seaweed. Is there really any value in articulating that silence, in clearing the green stain on the water's surface? Abandoning the tranquility granted by insignificance? Renouncing joyless contentment for a hint of illumination? Do you really believe in literature as a means of rectifying the past? Are you prepared to become two beings, oppressed by both memory and the future? To find yourself in a space between being and non-being, between two fictions, like Cioran? There will be hope, endless hope, but not for you. Because in order to capture the meaning of things, you have to feel them first. And all the tumult will likely drive you to collapse.

And yet, something pushes you to write. But what, exactly? And if you knew, how would you manage to find the right language? How will you manage if, one day, you discover that all along you've only been digging graves in the air? After the questions, the mounting fears, the reservations, it's always the same: right as you're about to give up, to turn back, a gust of wind pushes you with unusual force. A mound of scattered rubble starts to form in your wake, a trail of dates, inconclusive stories, poorly-healed wounds. Like an angel that beats his wings and tries to pause upon hearing the murmur of other names: Gorgot, Suñer, Gurland, Lisa Fittko. But that weakness becomes strong, just like a letter

written at the top of a blank page. You become a patient who slowly gets better by describing your illness. You discover that therein lies the key, that telling is the beginning of an arduous, complicated recovery, and every word you use, every syntagm, bears the mark of the people who came before you. This is how what really matters is made manifest: wrapped in prior events, burdened with another, older existence. A plot that connects any given space with a distant time. If you happen to observe and put on paper every layer that brings you closer to what you seek, and if that vision is accompanied by an internal illumination, you will gain great insight, full of meaning, and give rise to a new universe. What is far away will slowly draw closer to you and the encounter will be a singular one. You will inhale the aura of things. The object will be so close that—together—you will form a single substance. You will be one and you will be many. And when you look upon what you have achieved, perhaps it won't matter whether the object were to disappear. If you were to disappear. Because you will have finally found a shelter to protect you for the rest of your days. A place where the page is no longer blank, gaining new texture as you include all your earlier outlines, all your earlier notes, all you have assembled in order to raise something like a wall. Even if that wall separates you from your surroundings and renders you invisible. Even if everything that surrounds the wall ceases to exist, laid waste by a gust of wind.

This is the task, to reassemble the pieces: loose, unraveled, strewn about in a gale. Bring the distance close again, maintain a visible trace of the potter in the clay. Approach a border, the point at which we can foresee what is still yet to come. Identify the trench that persists in dividing two plots of land. Your task is to bring it all to the limits of a single page, reduce them in the extreme so they might fit

between four walls, minimize them enough to understand their conflict, their interior struggle. That's what this is about; it's about waiting for the strength you'll need to keep both hands tense as they release writing, any writing, as if you were drawing back a bowstring, ready to loose an arrow.

Then you discover that behind that trip, behind Portbou and Walter Benjamin, behind the objects scattered across your desk, behind all the conversations and the rambling walks, behind all of that, you sought just one thing. You sought the chance to give shape to the diary you long wanted to write, as if your earlier life had been no more than a long, patient wait. And it makes you think, almost for the first time, that maybe Portbou is just the initial step toward another territory, still unexplored, even if you've cited it somewhere, but no longer remember exactly where in the world it happened.

Katixa Agirre

Vitoria-Gasteiz, 1981

Katixa Agirre made her debut in Basque literature was with the short story collection *Sua falta zaigu* (Elkar, 2007), followed by *Habitat* (Elkar, 2009), for which she won the Igartza Fellowship for young writers. After numerous works of children's and young adult literature, she published her first novel in 2015, *Atertu arte Itxaron* (Elkar, 2015), a road novel which won the 111 Akademia Prize, and was translated into Spanish as *Los Turistas Desganados* (Pre-textos, 2017) as well as Danish and Bulgarian. Thanks to the Augustin Zubikarai prize, she published her most recent novel, *Amek ez dute* (Elkar) in 2018, translated as *Las madres no* (Tránsito, 2019). Agirre earned her PhD in Audiovisual Communication and teaches at the Universidad del País Vasco.

When and why did you start writing?

Very young, as a child, for the simple pleasure of emulating what I liked so much—reading. But when I was about twenty-two, at a time when I was transitioning into adulthood, I started to take it seriously

What themes are you concerned with?

I don't choose my subjects based on themes, at least not consciously. Although in retrospect, there are themes that do repeat: violence and the lies we need to function as a society, for example, are two prevalent ones.

Who are some of your favorite writers and influences?

Two books that defined my childhood were *The Neverending Story and When Hitler Stole the Pink Rabbit*, because they didn't smooth over the dark side of life, despite being children's books. I've also been influenced by Truman Capote, Lorrie Moore, Patricia Highsmith, and Ramón Saizarbitoria, among many others.

As a fiction writer, what are some trends you have seen in recently published books? Which ones do you find most interesting

I am interested in the hybridization of genres and the thin line between fiction and reality, although I also appreciate books that continue to celebrate and harness the power of pure fiction.

If you could have been a writer in another place and time, when and where would you choose?

As a Basque writer, I don't think there has ever been a better time to write in that language, so I'll stay put where I am.

Are you currently working on any new projects? If so, what are they?

I'm starting to think about a new story, and it might—for the first time—have some elements of science fiction. It's too early to say anything else.

SYNOPSIS

A mother kills her twins. Another woman, the narrator of this story, is about to give birth. She is a writer, and she realizes that she knows the woman who committed the infanticide. An obsession is born. She takes an extended leave, not for child-rearing, but to write. To research and write about the hidden truth behind the crime.

Mothers don't write. Mothers give life. How could a woman be capable of neglecting her children? How could she kill them? Is motherhood a prison? Complete with elements of a traditional thriller, this a groundbreaking novel in which the chronicle and the essay converge. Katixa Agirre reflects on the relationship between motherhood and creativity, in dialogue with writers such as Sylvia Plath and Doris Lessing. *Mothers Don't* plumbs the depths of childhood and the lack of protection children face before the law. The result is a disturbing, original novel in which the author does not offer answers, but plants contradictions and discoveries.

FORENSIC MEDICINE
(From *Las madres no* / Mothers Don't)

O love, how did you get here?
O embryo
Remembering, even in sleep,
Your crossed position.
Sylvia Plath

They are the acts constituting a criminal offense. The acts which have been committed, intended as a crime, as defined by the law. Always the acts, *los hechos*, the participle made noun, a grammatical device used to refer to the incident at the heart of a trial, or to avoid naming the incident altogether, given the fact that while still on trial, the incident isn't quite made of solid stuff. The letters *A-C-T* conceal the act itself. Until proven, it doesn't exist. I will also use those words: the act. *Homicide, infanticide, murder, double drowning* all prove to be unbearable, frankly. They resist leaving my fingertips; they hang in suspension over my keyboard and don't dare to jump.

In November of the year the acts were committed, I took advantage of the fact that I was going to Vitoria to accept the Euskadi Prize and went to see the Armentia neighborhood for the first time. Niclas swapped his afternoon classes with

a colleague and we went as a family to accept the award. My father would arrive a little later, on his own. My mother couldn't find a reasonably priced plane ticket; apparently, November is a busy month (the first I'd heard of it). I told her not to worry, it's just a formality. We would celebrate the next time she came to visit.

The weather was awful, rain sweeping across the highway and rattling the trees. Still, with just an hour to go before the ceremony, I convinced Niclas to make a quick stop in Vitoria's wealthiest neighborhood. Finding a place to park was easy, as was locating the house, which had been thoroughly photographed in the days following the incident. The chalet rose elegantly from the edge of a field—the site of a popular annual pilgrimage—near the lovely Roman basilica and at a palatable distance from the other homes. Round and symmetrical, the house stood proudly under the rain, as if nothing of note had occurred within its walls, as if everything had gone just as the builders had planned. The entire façade of the second floor was a giant glass window, now hidden by grey blinds. The rest of the house looked like a traditional Basque farmhouse: pitched roof, exposed timber.

Although the house was shuttered and empty, someone had made sure the yard was kept neat. Maybe it was on the market, a likely assumption, even with no visible for sale sign. In Hong Kong, they use the word *hongza*, to describe homes that are silent witnesses to suicide or crime. Their value tends to plummet, making them attractive properties for investors confident in the short memories of home buyers. In Japan, they are the *jiko bukken*, "marked" homes you can specifically search for using filters on real estate websites, morbid details included. Who, how, when.

Two babies, drowned in the bathtub, at the height of summer.

The acts.

Could something be sensed there? A light vibration? An air of doom, of foreboding? I thought so, but Niclas denied it: it was November, that was all, night was falling, it was pouring rain. I had the baby asleep in the carrier and a single umbrella couldn't protect all three of us. Niclas was obviously uneasy standing in front of the house, but who wouldn't be? What did the neighbors, who were few and far between, do when they walked past it? Did they bring visitors, linger out front, embellish their tour with sinister details? Or had it become the neighborhood's big taboo, as it had in the fertility clinic? An incident to keep hidden, silent and forgotten for the good of the area's reputation and property values?

We didn't see anyone else, so I can only speculate.

Back in the car and on our way to the presidential seat of the Basque government, I took a few notes, unaware that my hair was completely plastered to my head. Pictures from the ceremony plainly show that I hadn't looked in a mirror before I took the stage to accept the award from the *lehendakari*. On Twitter, my appearance was commented on, as was the suggestion that I'd only gotten the award because I was a girl.

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The events of the first days are straightforward. Well-documented, exactly as they should be in well-greased court proceedings. In my search for a full account, I don't know whether such a profusion of details is an advantage or an impediment.

The authorities never considered alternative suspects. There had been no trace of anyone else, and the home security cameras didn't register any movements in the four hours that

passed between when the nanny left and when she returned. No wolves, no dingoes. The hypothesis of an accidental death was automatically ruled out, due to the statistical impossibility of two identical accidents occurring successively. The media, however, did insinuate that the first death could have been a case of involuntary manslaughter, and that the mother—overwhelmed by the situation, in a grievous state of shock—then committed the second murder. Pure speculation. From the point of view of the forensic investigators, the case was simple. All evidence and reports were sent to the judge post-haste.

After dispatching her little ones, Alice was taken into police custody and brought to the seventh floor of the Santiago Hospital, a habitual refuge for anorexics and alcoholics. The psychiatrists on duty noted that they found Alice "disoriented and in a state of shock," leaving the door open to possible "dissociative amnesia." They gave her sedatives. She barely spoke, although on several occasions they heard her whisper "where are they?" and "they're all right now, aren't they?" When asked what her name was, Alice told them "Jade," which confused the doctors. Ertzaintza officers were posted outside her room the whole time. Forensic investigators had already collected her clothes, immediately sealing them in plastic evidence bags. Her hands were swabbed for biological material.

It was very late by the time they let her sleep.

The next morning, forensic physicians sent by the investigating judge arrived at the hospital to perform tests on the patient. They examined her over the course of three hours, with fresh officers stationed outside the door. Though she had refused breakfast, Alice was beginning to show some reaction. She asked about her children, and when they told her what had happened, she shouted that it wasn't possible; "Never never never," she screamed and wailed. Eventually, her

howling faded to a dull moan. Then came silence, and soon after, more shaking, more spasms.

A public defender also turned up at the hospital that morning. He had a gentle way about him and youthful appearance, and had just spent half the night at the police station helping a kid under arrest for assaulting a supermarket security guard. Now he found himself in a situation unlike any other he'd encountered over the eight years he'd worked as a legal aid. He hadn't slept in twenty-six hours and, faced with the stifling heat and a broken client, he struggled to get control of the situation. The young lawyer finally had the presence of mind to advise his client on her right to choose not to testify before the judge. It seemed that Alice heard him and even followed his advice, since when the judge arrived at the hospital, he got nothing from Alice but her nearly depleted tears, her final exhausted sobs.

By that time, the consequences of the acts—the two small bodies, in other words—were already in the Basque Institute of Legal Medicine on Avenida Gasteiz, awaiting autopsy, one that would reveal no surprises. The same cause of death: drowning. Foam in the lungs, water in the stomach, the left cavity of the heart drained of blood. Those little hearts left no room for other hypotheses. The very next day, the investigating judge wrote the order for Alice's incarceration and she was sent to the prison in Zaballa, a prescription for sleeping pills and sedatives in hand. No one was certain that she was even aware of the crimes. The news media disseminated all manner of opinions: "Not even an eternity in Hell could atone for what she's done, that vile woman," a very concerned male citizen of Vitoria declared. Another citizen, a woman this time, and even more upset, if that's possible, expressed another view: "Her true punishment will come once that poor woman realizes what she's done."

In total, Alice spent five days in prison, all of them in the infirmary, given that no one really knew what to do with her,

which protocol to follow. Prisons were not built for women like Alice.

Ritxi didn't return to the house in Armentia after the first interrogation. It was said that a friend picked him up at the station and brought him straight to his house in Elciego. Only one newspaper bothered to report this; as for the others, Ritxi is absent. How he spent those five days or what might have gone through his head will forever be a mystery.

Over the course of the five days Alice spent behind bars, three notable things occurred. The first was predictable, although that doesn't make it any less horrible. The other two are completely unexpected.

First, the twins were cremated at a funeral facility on the outskirts of Vitoria. It was an intimate event: Ritxi, his brother, who had recently arrived from Austin, and a few close friends. They came and went from the facility by car. There are no pictures from inside the funeral home. I don't know if they read poems or sang something during the service. It's better that way. Who wants to know those details? Not even me.

Second, despite the fact that they'd adopted a different strategy in the first days following the crimes, the media suddenly began to show Alice sympathy. Reviewing documentation in the archives with a certain distance, as I do now, the change in the press's tactics is certainly striking. Alice was pronounced as broken, incapable of accepting what she had done; they remarked that the very act of committing the crimes would have been torture, that she would never get over it, that her life would be a perpetual hell. The possibility of postpartum depression was raised, suggested for the first time by a supposed neighbor I've never been able to locate, and later in the form of assumptions, percentages, and symptoms bandied about by psychiatric experts. It's possible that the media employed this new framework with the simple, earnest

goal of prolonging consumer interest in the story. The origins of media conspiracies can often be quite prosaic.

Who knows. In any case, public opinion approved of the new angle. It meant people could abandon the crude terrain of crime reporting, the banal territory o*f the acts*, of what happened, and become fully immersed in a modern-day Greek tragedy.

And lastly, there is the most surprising detail, the thing I have the most trouble understanding: Ritxi decided to hire Alice a good lawyer.

The day after his children were cremated, Ritxi momentarily broke his self-exile in the Rioja Alavesa to get in touch with his personal lawyer and ask for the name of best criminal defense lawyer in the city. A female attorney, close to retirement and with a reputation as a feminist activist, came up immediately: Carmela Basaguren. She agreed to take the case the same day they contacted her and got right to work. At the time, the priority was getting Alice out of the jail in Zaballa. The appeal quickly came across the judge's desk. The document, well-constructed and convincing, detailed the reasons Alice should be released from pre-trial detention: the impossibility of committing the same crime again, roots in the community, lack of flight risk, etc., etc.

In the arguments for the appeal, the defense gave early indication that they expected an acquittal on the grounds of extenuating circumstances due to mental derangement. The criminal code had foreseen these situations: Article 20.1, specifically, which establishes that an individual "who, due to any psychiatric anomaly or alteration at the time the crime is committed, is unable to understand the illegality of the act, or act in accordance with this understanding" is absolved of criminal responsibility, as Carmela Basaguren saw fit to remind the investigating judge, citing the statute word-for-word.

The prosecution couldn't have disagreed more and opposed Alice's release, citing the seriousness of the case, as well as nature of the charges against her: for two murders—a grave double offense with family relationship as an aggravating circumstance—Alice was facing forty years in prison. But to the surprise of most observers, the judge ruled in support of the defense's request. With her passport withdrawn, the obligation to appear in court every fifteen days, and fifty thousand euro posted as bail, Alice was released.

Free, the murderess. Free, the ghost.

***

There is a myth rooted in pre-Hispanic cultures that later gained strength during the colonial period. La Llorana, a woman who throws her two children (or son, or daughter, depending on the story) into a river. Devastated by guilt, she then kills herself and begins her erratic roaming, never straying far from bodies of water.

From Mexico to Chile, the story unfolds in similar ways; the mythemes (those small interchangeable puzzle pieces from which myths are constructed) are repeated. The modus operandi is almost always the same: the children are drowned (whether in a river or a lake), although stabbing is often mentioned, as well. In some places, such as Panama, the mother's negligence causes her child's death (the mother wants to dance, to go off and enjoy herself, and it occurs to her that leaving the baby on a riverbank is the answer). But in most of the stories, the woman is seduced, impregnated, and later abandoned by the impregnator. And in these circumstances, without the means of survival for herself or her baby, she commits infanticide. There are also Lloronas who act out of

spite, Hispanic Medeas who, with the intention of wounding the man who has abandoned them, decide to murder his offspring, the tangible fruit of a now-extinguished love.

In any case, the consequences are always the same: an errant soul, eternal punishment, infinite tears adding water to water.

That night, I dreamt of Australia. Despite systematically disregarding my dreams for decades, I feel the need to record this oneiric episode for future analysis. I don't really remember much: the arid Australian landscape, the whiff of threat, only vaguely sensed. The amorphous dream-memory doesn't leave me over the course of the day, so I look back over what I wrote on the previous day. I reread three or four pages and there, I find it, that exotic word: dingo. What is a dingo, exactly? A wild dog, native to Southeast Asia but commonly found in Australia. *Canis lupus dingo*. But what is a dingo doing in my manuscript? I look up the word and don't have to wait long for an answer. It all comes back to me in the form of a movie I saw as a child.

August 17th, 1980, in the vicinity of Ayers Rock, known today as Mount Uluṟu, sacred land in the North Territory in the center of Australia. It's here that the Chamberlain family has come camping with their three children. While they barbecue their dinner, the youngest Chamberlain—Azaria, just nine weeks old—is left sleeping peacefully in the tent. In the middle of the meal, Lindy, the mother, thinks she hears barking. No one else seems to hear it, but her instinct tells her something is wrong. She dives into the tent, fearing the worst, and in effect, finds it empty: there is no trace of the newborn. In the midst of her terror, Lindy is able to glimpse the shape of a dingo disappearing into the darkness. Only the mother witnessed the animal, the rest of the family simply heard her screams. Azaria was never seen again.

The case could have wound up like so many other tragic accidents, maybe even becoming part of the fabric of popular culture, the moral of a story, a warning for negligent parents. But things didn't stop there. After twists and turns in the investigation and with a parallel, full-blown media trial raging in the Australian press, Lindy was ultimately sentenced to life in prison for the murder of her own daughter. What was the evidence pointing to such a crime? There wasn't much. The body was never found. There was never an indication that the mother had a motive. A pair supposedly bloodstained scissors, conveniently exhibited to the public, turned out to just be covered in red paint. But the mother's attitude during the trial—cold, detached—was sufficient for a conscientious jury to send her to prison for the rest of her life.

Lindy gave birth to a fourth baby during her first weeks in jail. She spent three years behind bars before the case was reopened on account of new evidence: remnants of Azaria's clothing, found near a dingo lair. The discovery put the verdict in doubt and she was eventually released. Even so, the case wasn't definitively closed until 2012, when Azaria's death certificate was amended to indicate dingo attack as the cause of death. For her wrongful conviction, Lindy Chamberlain received a sizable settlement on behalf of the Australian government.

Who knows who let me watch the movie version of Azaria's case. I suppose it must have been my father, since I used to spend my weekends with him, watching TV in the afternoon while he dozed beside me on the couch. What *wouldn't* I discover on those interminable Saturday and Sunday afternoons? How many monsters would come to inhabit my nightmares thanks to those movies? Fu Manchu, killer sharks, roaring crowds, Marisol and her lottery . . .

Back then, I didn't know that Lindy Chamberlain was a real person and that her case was—is—the most famous in Australian true crime. But clearly, the story left its mark; I still had vague recollections. And the word *dingo*, so chirpy-sounding on its own, still poisons my dreams.

Uluṟu.

Dingo.

Uluṟu.

Dingo.

Two pleasant words, lively, appealing, apt for the title of a successful novel. Typographical oddity and all.

Florencia del Campo

Buenos Aires, 1982

Florencia del Campo was born in Buenos Aires and has lived in Madrid since 2013. Her first novel to be published in Spain was *La huésped* (Base Editorial, 2016), for which del Campo was a finalist for the 2014 Premio Equis de Novela. In 2017 she published *Madre mía* (Caballo de Troya, 2017). Her most recent novel, *La versión extranjera* (Pretextos, 2019), won the L Premio Internacional de Novela Ciudad de Barbastro. She has also published several novels in Argentina with indie presses, and children's titles in Spain.

When and why did you start writing?

Honestly, I started writing poems when I was very young—ten years old—because when I was nine, there was a big change in my life that was really painful for me. Then I grew up and started to write professionally. I was in my twenties when I started writing seriously and publishing in Argentina.

What themes are you concerned with?

The figure of the family, of the woman, foreignness, and language (and its impossibilities) pretty much more than anything.

Who are some of your favorite writers and influences?

Alejandra Pizarnik, Marguerite Duras, Albert Camus, Silvina Ocampo.

As a fiction writer, what are some trends you have seen in recently published books? Which ones do you find most interesting?

I'm interested in breaks with form. I'm interested in the ways in which form produces meaning and ideology. I'm interested in language taken to its limits. That everything that is said is done so precisely from the place where there are no words, from language's abyss.

If you could have been a writer in another place and time, when and where would you choose?

I don't idealize the past or future. I'm content where I am and with the decisions I've made. I love writing from Spain, my other country, the one that gave me the other half of the platelets in my blood.

Are you currently working on any new projects? If so, what are they?

I'm working on an idea about a book, probably a collection of stories, that will trace my father's side of the family: from my grandfather, born in Valdeavellano de Tera in Soria and who emigrated to the Argentinian Litoral, to my father, and lastly, to me. Using my family history and biography as a point of departure and constructing characters that let me move through stories of all types of migration, all the ways of being a foreigner.

SYNOPSIS

On one side of the ocean, a mother with cancer. On the other, a daughter looking for her place, her identity, her impossible freedom. *Madre mía* is a work of auto fiction that explores pain, belonging, and family. In this novel, Florencia del Campo makes a stark, honest journey through the elements that define filial relationships: guilt, love, recognition, obligation, distance, and the foreignness of our own family. There is no shame in this story, no respite. On this daring journey, del Campo's sharp-edged voice mixes with another—needy, sarcastic—and in the various scenes from the narrator's foster cities, creates an implacable message: no matter how clean the wound, you can't run from the cause.

MADRE MÍA
(From *Madre mía*)

V.

October 7, 2012. Aunt E.:

"I didn't mention it yesterday because it was way too much, but I talked to your mother and she asked me to find a doctor who would help her leave this world. She can't stand it anymore. She begged me not to abandon her in this. I don't know anyone, of course, but I said I would look into it. Not true. No way. She told S. she thinks about killing herself with gas. [. . .] I'm listening to Chávez right now. He won. And he had cancer. I don't think your mother is going to die anytime soon."

Ten days later: October 17, 2012. My father's birthday. I called him from Paris. I was rocking in an orange armchair. The balcony and the rain behind me. It always rains in Paris, the balconies are a mess, the orange armchair rocked. To my left, the bathroom and kitchen. To my right, a Frenchman. He watched me as I talked, fascinated by the fact that he couldn't understand a single word *(though made of words [. . .] one still has to guess)*. All we did was watch movies together, he was your competition. I had already begun to replace you. It was nighttime in Paris, day in Argentina. Winter everywhere.

The orange armchair rocked. In that city, I was predisposed to movements that weren't considered forward motion. The subtle dip of my toes on the floor, an instant of air, the floor again. Rocking. The conversation I had with my father isn't worth writing about. Language rocked, too: word after word, silence, word again. Silence. The floor. Rock again. To my right, the Frenchman who watched me. To my left, the house that was never mine. Behind me, Paris rain outside the window.

Things I did while in Paris: visit the Musée d'Orsay, visit the Louvre, visit the Palais de Tokyo, visit the Pompidou, visit Shakespeare and Company, visit the National Library. I went to the first by myself, to the second with a guy whose name I can't remember or maybe never knew. I went to the Palais with my friend A. a few times, once for an indie press book fair. I picked up a couple of catalogs and talked with A. about several projects. We went for coffee at a nearby outdoor café and he said: "It's super expensive here because this neighborhood is like the Recoleta in Buenos Aires." I went to the Pompidou with one of the worst hangovers I've ever had and then went home with the Italian who had taken it upon himself to get me drunk the night before. At the bookstore, I stole a Paul Auster novel that I would later give to R. during the parenthesis we carved out in our lives and which would have us meet in Buenos Aires, despite the fact that neither one of us lived in our hometown. But the National Library was the place I went every day to work. I borrowed a library card from the Frenchman who had watched me as I rocked in that apartment, in the cinema that was Paris.

Later. The night you died in the hospital bed set up in your room, S. ordered takeout for dinner: *asado* with potatoes for her and my two sisters and empanadas for me, because I didn't want to eat meat.

Come on! You're really going to describe the little party you had while I was dying?

We drank beer.

Oh, very nice . . . and I'll bet you smoked, too.

You lay prostrate on the metal-backed hospital bed like a sack full of water. Your body, a dead jellyfish dragged to shore by the tide. Your left hand kept slipping down, every once and a while we placed it back on your chest.

Like our El Greco print in the dining room?

Your fingers were terribly swollen. It was horrible to see your silver wedding ring adorning your hand like a tourniquet.

When they came to take your body, the social service people asked for dish soap to remove your ring. I went to the kitchen and grabbed the plastic bottle. It was next to the sink. It belonged on the side of the world where the simple things lived ever since Madrid, ever since the veneer came down and divided everything in two.

I carried the dish soap down the hall leading from the kitchen to your room. The young guy who had asked for it waited for me in the doorway, the door half-closed to prevent my seeing you.

But I peeked.

They had laid you out on the floor. A blanket covered you. The kid took the dish soap and closed the door behind him. I stood staring at the wooden door. Not metal. Wood. It divided. The world of simple things and living people. From a place of death. The dish soap crossed through. From one dimension to another. And ever since that day. It's possible I began. Not to be. On the same side. Of the veneer. As you.

Which dimension is yours, now? A thread of invisible slime follows you; it contaminates and infects. Slug, you drag yourself along and leave your trail. It was something else, the attempt to

avoid the path you drew. But now that the bedroom has fused with the kitchen, now that I live on the side of the world where people eat calamari, where eating calamari is living, nothing short of life itself, nothing else is on the menu, now that I have lost your trail in my attempts to avoid it. But if I ever come across your image in a film, I will know for sure: there were no sides, only borders. Time flowed. The wind shook the windowpane that looked out on a large tree in front of our—of your—house, a tree that ripped up the paving stones with the inevitable force of its roots. Nature and life followed suit, that's how it's always been. And maybe in those moments we were briefly at peace; for a while, just a little while, because really, life is here (imagine my hand running over a tabletop), on this surface. You can never really jump the border, not even when the most boundless, the expansive, thing is happening to you. The essential, something you can't escape.

Do I have the right to write this story?

A story based on your already-written medical history, no less.

In part, medical (hi)stories are always a fabrication.

There is an element of fiction in how we tell the doctor our story. As if when we say *it hurts here but yesterday it hurt there and today I feel a little better but yesterday was hit or miss*, language cannot quite manage to narrate the body escaping its borders, the physical body spilling over. In cases of such extensive medical histories, such fatal disease, we are silenced in the telling, as if to tell meant to stutter until we lose our voice.

Or save it.

But what am I saying? That's so depressing! You never were one for discourse, you went to those appointments with real hope, and sometimes you left disappointed.

It must be because you were the sick person. It wasn't your job to think about the words.

VI.

October 19, 2012. Marseille.

I went south, fleeing the cold and the rain—among other reasons. But when I got to Marseille, there was a wild storm and the wind destroyed three of my umbrellas. I met V. there. Meeting her brought on two feelings.

The first being that maybe I didn't want to keep moving around, maybe I was beginning to want a home where mostly I could consume movies and music, a place to put away my clothes. One evening, I saw V. in a red skirt, something like what Red Riding Hood would wear, and I thought I was probably starting to need them, the little symbols that ascribe an identity or place of belonging—to a table or to a body, it doesn't matter—and make it possible to go out and face the daily task of living, not the whole world. Regular life, where we don't question the reflection staring back at us. Order, a kind of learned discipline after the chaos had been tidied up.

Chaos, organized.

The idea of a base camp as something I both needed and longed for, while rejecting and refusing it, was the absolute symbol of my indecision. And the expression, of course, of my most neurotic phase.

Chaos, spilled and strewn.

The second feeling: a rejection of a particularly unstable way of speaking that entertains and distracts with clichés while postponing the idea or question.

Red.

Benefits of being nearsighted: I looked out the window. I thought the sun was setting, but it was a red building across the street.

To lack sight.

I spent the whole month of October 2012 in France. I met F. thanks to A. I was able to stay in F.'s house in Paris for a bit. That was a relief: Paris isn't just museums and culture, cinema and French. It is also rain, cold, and shame. Before F., I spent some of the afternoons sitting in laundromats. There were no employees present; the machines are coin-operated. There were washing machines at the back and chairs lining the walls, where you could sit and wait for your load of clothes to be done. I myself sat to have somewhere to be. This was a time when I managed to find a bed to sleep in for the night but nowhere to spend the afternoon. If a customer came in, I pretended I was waiting for my laundry, that one of the spinning mounds of clothes was mine. Outside, it rained every day and every day I couldn't afford to hole up somewhere that required me to buy something. I didn't have access to a card to work in the library yet. A friend in Buenos Aires told me that she imagined me writing novels in Parisian cafes. I'm usually in the laundromat eating Turkish takeout, I replied in my email.

I liked staying at F.'s. She spoke little and read a lot, and I think she admired me, too. She asked me about my life. I gave her a book on Portugal that I later missed and wished I could have consulted on more than one occasion. But it was always a consolation to remember that F. had it, and not someone else.

F. got sick. We didn't know what she had. We thought it would pass. I bought her apples.

I asked her every day if she felt better and she said yes. But one day I saw that she couldn't get up to go to the bathroom.

It's nothing, she'd say, let's watch a movie. We watched several.

Let's read. We read for hours in the same bed.

Outside, it rained. Always the same.

It's nothing, F.? Are you sure?

Nothing.

But she couldn't get up to go to the bathroom.

She went to see another doctor, one she could really trust, according to her sister.

Nothing. It was nothing. This pill every eight hours, such and such a diet, and this for the fever.

Nothing?

Nothing. The same opinion as the first doctor: nothing.

Days passed.

Are you sure you're feeling better? Yes, yes, she replied every time.

That it was nothing.

Another movie, another book, the rain. Paris, nothing.

F. was on the verge of dying. I was traveling.

You're always traveling when other people are dying.

She had an emergency operation. They saved her life.

When I saw her again, F. said: "It's an interesting experience, not being able to count on your body at all."

I was left stuttering in fear.

Over nothing.

Had F. died, it would have seemed like the most unjust thing in the world. She wasn't even thirty. I wasn't either, but I wasn't dying, I was traveling.

All the time, nonstop.

The present. I get home to my apartment in Madrid. There's a woman, a kind of visiting hairdresser, dyeing my housemate's hair. It reminds me of when A. would go to your house to wash your hair. That was July 2012, you had just had surgery, the scar was a train track stamped along the right side of your ribcage, I was always wearing a patchwork wool sweater, you and A. examined it carefully, felt it, you

wanted to see how it had been knit, everything had to do with craftsmanship or aesthetics, beauty parlor conversations, the simple things. Combined with the occasional morning visit from a nurse, A.'s dropping by in the afternoon provided a modicum of routine. I needed someone else to entertain you, for things to come through other people, too. Later, a Friday, I think, I went out in the appalling cold to get your medicine at the pharmacy on the other side of the Plaza Irlanda. As I headed home on the Avenida Gaona, down the sidewalk I'd been walking my whole life, I knew I could no longer be found there, it was as if I had evaporated. I came to terms with the fact that I had already committed the act of leaving and that it was hopeless for me to return.

No matter how many times you leave, it's the first time that really counts.

July 2013. One year after that raw winter, starved sunlight, train tracks on skin, steamed bodies. Interest in the moral question. I asked my friend R. for his opinion on whether I had to go see you before you died. I wanted him to give me his view, based fundamentally on morality. He was firm: he termed my absence "deliberate" and said it was very likely to cause a rift with my sisters; he referred to me as "nomadic" and argued (including himself in this category) that "people like us are selfish out of necessity"; he agreed that I should cultivate my independence but suspected that I would feel really awful later; he encouraged me to make the decision that would cause me the least pain, while pointing out that a certain amount of chafing was inevitable when dealing with family ("you can only try to minimize the damage," he added); he claimed that, in the end, the ethical thing always comes down to our private lives, and that this is natural; he wanted to make a clear distinction regarding the guilt of responsibility; he said: "You aren't guilty of anything [. . .] but

you feel responsible for being far away." "I morally support you in everything you do," he added. "I've never loved you more than I do now."

What I wanted to know: Do we (daughters and sons) have the (moral) obligation to care for of our parents when they get sick, or do we have a choice (based on our feelings, our history, the circumstances . . .)?

I understood then that the question I posed couldn't be separated from the individual, from my specific situation. And moreover, regardless of what my friend replied, the truth was it would always have a little to do with costs and consequences.

I feared there was no answer (because perhaps there wasn't even a question) that could transcend the particularities of my case and allow me to talk about this.

One month after the moral question: August 17, 2013. I took a flight to Buenos Aires with layovers in Munich and Frankfurt. I arrived the morning of Sunday, August 18th. I went to see you in the afternoon, you had become a jellyfish. Your wedding ring, a tourniquet. You didn't look at me or speak, you no longer opened your eyes, you weren't conscious. I said hello and told you I was there, I'd arrived. Nothing. The silence of neap tide, dead calm, madre mía, sea life, mamá muerta. I went to sleep at my sister M. 's. The next day was a bank holiday and I would take care of you day and night. On the way from your place to M.'s, I strolled through a fair they had set up in Plaza Irlanda, the park midway between your two houses. The fair was ethnically-themed. They had food from different countries and typical souvenirs and indigenous-type wares. I felt at peace, liberated, a decision had been made, something was happening almost by itself. The motion of a tide, turned to wake. On the morning of Monday the 19th I went to

your house, I took care of you early, then S. came over and at dinnertime we ordered takeout: *asado*, French fries, and empanadas. It was unusually warm, we brought the table out to the patio so we could eat outside, the heat was unreal for August in Buenos Aires, impossible, the stuff of fiction. At twelve midnight on the dot, like an after-dinner toast, we had to give you your medicine orally, with a syringe. You had trouble swallowing. S. and my sister M. were already gone. L. said she would help me give you the three treatments. I administered the first. It wouldn't go down, we had to massage your trachea to move the liquid, you couldn't do anything by then. L. tried to lift your torso in hopes that a more upright position would help you swallow, off and on I massaged your trachea, you were so heavy that day, almost impossible for us to move, we couldn't get the pain medication into you, it must have been terrible, we were sweating, we rolled up our sleeves, pushed you from behind and pulled on your arms, stacked pillows behind your back to prop you up, turned the crank on the hospital bed many, many times, you started making a weird sound, liquid in the throat, we were afraid you hadn't swallowed any of the medication, you were bubbling inside, L. was really upset, she was afraid you were in pain, I started thinking that somehow the sound would eventually have to stop, almost fifteen minutes went by, you were still making that sound, it was getting worse, we were exhausted, we wrestled with your body, slug, jellyfish, I suddenly thought of F., in the impossibility of being able to count on your body, and I knew then exactly what was happening. The sound was deafening. I saw, as if in a vision, that only a hole in your trachea could stop the gurgling. I looked at my sister and said: Call an ambulance! Now!

She ran out of the room to get the phone. I shirred my

eyelids shut and puckered my lips, three asterisks drawn on my face. When she came back, she told me they'd said they would send one. She thought it might take longer than an hour. I looked at her, she looked at me, wanting me to say something, but she didn't dare ask. A windless cloud hovered. In the background, mother-thunder. I grabbed her arm and said: let's wait outside.

Jordi Nopca

Barcelona, 1983

Jordi Nopca is one of the most widely read and respected authors on the Catalan literary scene. After completing his degree in Journalism and Literary Theory, he became a translator and a full-time journalist. His first novel *El Talent* was published in 2012, followed by his story collection *Puja a casa*, awarded the prestigious Premio Documenta for up-and-coming Catalan writers. His second novel *La teva ombra* is the winner of the Premi Proa de Novela, a milestone in his career. He has been compared to writers like Etgar Keret and Raymond Carver, and is known for his acid sense of humor and ability to portray the absurdity of everyday modern life. He is currently an editor at the newspaper *Ara* and editor-in-chief of the cultural supplement *Ara Llegim*.

When and why did you start writing?

I started writing because my grandparents bought me a little notebook when I was seven years old. Drawings weren't enough for the story I wanted to tell, and so, without meaning to, I started to complicate my life by putting together letters and words.

What themes are you concerned with?

Everything human and a good deal of the animal world. The discontinuity of memory, and lastly, I'd add psychological instability.

Who are some of your favorite writers and influences?

J. D. Salinger, Mercè Rodoreda, Boris Vian, Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, Astrid Lindgren.

As a fiction writer, what are some trends you have seen in recently published books? Which ones do you find most interesting?

Everything that resonates with the vanguards of the first half of the twentieth century interests me, as well as the exploration of the unconscious and subconscious, in prose or poetry.

If you could have been a writer in another place and time, when and where would you choose?

I'm content with this era. And my city, Barcelona.

Are you currently working on any new projects? If so, what are they?

I just published my most recent novel *La teva ombra*, and the Spanish translation, *En la sombra*. I write regularly—though without a clear methodology—and I have a few projects going. I would like to finish the next novel by the end of 2020 to be able to have it published, with luck, a year later, or perhaps a bit after that.

SYNOPSIS

The lives of two brothers move in parallel, like two rivers or two cars in the opposite direction. Pere is 25 years old and spends the summer of 2010 living at home with his parents. He distracts himself with electronic music, a leisure and culture website project, and sexual encounters with Kate, an enigmatic English violinist. But he cannot get his ex-girlfriend Laura out of his head. In the meantime, his older brother Joan, a voracious reader who works as a primary school teacher, has a secret life that will drastically affect him.

Combining drama and irony, *En la sombra* is an ambitious novel about personal identity in our modern times.

EN LA SOMBRA

(From *En la sombra* /In Your Shadow)

Laura came by to pick me up. My parents thought I'd made plans with "those colleague-friends" of mine—or friend-colleagues, or maybe they weren't that either. I told them we had planned to get together near the coast, to recharge before the final push we had to make in September, in order to launch the site. Instead, I opened the passenger door of a red SEAT and found myself faced with my ex-girlfriend's slender legs. I quickly lifted my eyes to her face. She greeted me with a warm smile that didn't disappear when I leaned in to kiss her on both cheeks.

"How are you, devil?"

"Out of my mind."

"And otherwise?"

"Getting by."

I noticed she was wearing a different perfume: something tropical, a tropical forest after the rain, a complex scent suggesting an increase in her purchasing power. Back when we were together, Laura would have never considered wearing shorts, not even in the summer—she was more of a skirts-and-dresses kind of girl—but she was wearing a pair that day, and they looked good on her. Her whole outfit was unexpected.

She had on a black T-shirt, some American brand name printed on the sleeve. It looked new.

I barely spoke on the drive, paralyzed by the detailed account of her trip to the U.S., which I listened to with both patience and envy. The Madrid paper she worked for had sent her to write about the New York literary scene, and she wound up stringing together a month of vacation after the week of work.

"The first time you called, I was just about to interview a woman who published a novel about a family of alligator tamers in a Florida theme park. Karen Russell. Have you heard of her?"

"Nope."

Laura told me about renting a van with a group of friends. She didn't give their names, or say how many they had been or how she met them. They drove through Atlantic City and D.C. When they confirmed that the U.S. capital was actually pretty boring, they headed north toward Pittsburgh, and ended up driving across the state of Pennsylvania until they reached Ohio, then continued on to Indiana—she recommended that I stop in Fort Wayne, if I was ever in the area. After spending a few days in Chicago, in northern Illinois, they drove up to Wisconsin before popping over to Minnesota, to see Duluth, the birthplace of Bob Dylan.

"It's small, but it's cool, especially the waterfront."

From Minnesota they crossed into Iowa, and then stopped in St. Louis, Missouri. In Kentucky, they met a group of students from Argentina who were on their way back from Cleveland, inspiring Laura and her friends to want to visit.

"I would have stayed and lived there," she said. "Cleveland is awesome."

We drove through the seaside town of Palamós to the development where Laura's parents owned a house. The beach was packed and I wished I had brought a bathing suit. Maybe

a swim would have helped break up the distance between us, though I wasn't sure that was even for the best.

The single-family home, inherited from the side of the family from Ampurdán, was as comfortable and tasteful as I remembered. Soon after sitting down on the leather couch in the living room, I noticed that the rug—which had received our bodies so many times in the past—was now gone. The fireplace observed me smugly, comparing me to Laura's other lovers who must have lain there as well, warmed by the fire's hypnotic flames. I excused myself to go to the bathroom. In passing, I glanced into the bedroom they kept for Laura's great-aunt, also profaned by our bodies on many occasions. The old bedspread still covered the mattress. I wanted to lie down, ascertain whether the embroidered surface retained any trace of the pleasure we'd once given each other. I didn't succumb to the temptation.

Laura was waiting for me in the living room, a stack of papers on her lap. Her new novel, *Océano Atlántico*.

"It's not like anything you've read of mine. You could say my style—and my interests—have changed."

"What do you want me to do with it?"

"Simple. I want you to be the first to read it."

"What?"

"I'm going to clean out my room. I need to see what clothes I have here and pick out some books and CDs. It'll take me a while."

"Not even if you were going away forever."

"We'll talk about that later."

"That sounds bad."

"Please read the book."

And she said my name.

Through her fiction, I pieced together the unexpected turn Laura's life had taken. The first part of the book combined a recounting of Sandra the protagonist's first months on the

job at a newspaper, complete with a bitter portrait of me. She had named me Eduardo. She had me living in a well-to-do neighborhood in Madrid and had made me even taller and more promiscuous. When it came to imagining the sex with Kate—whom she had renamed Rachel—she was understated. She wrote of brief, laconic encounters during which my character was so filled with regrets that he couldn't reach orgasm. "He was a man consumed with a thunderous sense of guilt," she wrote. I skimmed the passages in which she recalled how she had suffered after she discovered my habitual infidelity. She said the main reason she left me wasn't because I had betrayed her with another woman, but because she felt held back by me, stagnant. Employing a somewhat trivial analogy, she defined my character: "Eduardo is a puddle of dirty water."

The second part was harder for me to read. One random day after leaving the office, Sandra went for a drink with one of the deputy editors at the paper. The man was named Ignacio, he was about forty, and he managed to get her to a little hotel in Malasaña. Shortly after they hooked up, as they lay naked in bed, he informed her that he had to rush home: his daughter had an ear infection and he had to take her to the doctor first thing in the morning.

They continued seeing each other secretly over several weeks, right up to the evening of the newspaper's tenth anniversary party. The suspicions of several colleagues were confirmed when they were caught going at it right outside the club they went to after the party. Laura found it necessary to quote the lewd reggaetón lyrics in the background: *" Ah ah whoa dale mambo ah (entre tú y yo)/ dale mambo (daddy) / son cosas que pasan en el barrio fino."* I needed the bathroom break after that chapter. On my way through the dining room, I noticed a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* on the table—one of the books Joan had recommended to me a thousand times and that was still on my

list. Meanwhile, Laura was upstairs, filling suitcases with parts of her past that she didn't want to *leave behind*; she was already starting to sound like one of her narrative puppets. Maybe she was going to live with the real Ignacio, or had decided to change jobs, change countries, a fresh start after a second failed relationship? I would have loved to read: "Ignacio is a puddle of dirty water, too."

In the second to last chapter, Sandra goes to bed with another ex-lover. In the wee hours of the morning, she has a dream that this Marcos guy—a circumstantial and expendable fling—is a psychopath who wants to kill her, so she flees the room while he sleeps. A few pages later, Ignacio, newly-separated from his wife and granted a year's sabbatical from the office, proposes that he and Sandra set themselves up together in New York, where they could continue to collaborate on pieces for the paper and other outlets: a new professional horizon unfurled before them. *Océano Atlántico* comes to a close in the Empire State. High above the city, all of Manhattan at their feet, Ignacio asks Sandra to marry him, and gets a yes. *The end*.

Now that I was up to speed on Laura's year, I could have easily left. Instead, I waited for her to finish packing. I sat on the couch, stunned, eyes trained on the spot where the rug should have been, imagining the probable flabbiness of a forty-something body, until she appeared downstairs and asked—from a prudent distance, in case I threw myself at her like a angry animal—if I had liked the book.

"Look, I'm not sure what to say." I hurried to qualify my response. "I don't have enough distance from everything you've written about. And the Eduardo guy you compare me to seems like a gross caricature of . . ."

"He has nothing to do with you."

"Yeah, okay. And you're not heading off to New York, either. Right?"

My reply wounded her. Laura bit her lip and stepped back into the kitchen. I made to go after her, but stopped next to the Salinger book, hypnotized by the cover. When I had seen it earlier, I thought there had been an image below the author's name and the title. That photograph or illustration was gone now. All that was left was a flesh-colored surface that gave the impression of softness and warmth, like it was a living thing. Laura stuck her head out from the kitchen and leaned against the doorframe, only half her body visible to me. Maybe she had more news. What if she was pregnant? Was she planning to have the baby in the U.S.? Americanize it from birth so it would grow up strong, indestructible, raised on a high-protein diet? Those were the sort of ridiculous questions that passed through my mind as I observed her.

"All day I've been trying to apologize for acting like an idiot," I murmured. "Ever since I lost you, my life has been fucking shit."

Laura had an uncomfortable look on her face, like there was a stone in her shoe.

"That's what I've been wanting to tell you. I was wrong. So wrong. I get that you didn't want to hear from me this whole time. You knew how to take care of yourself and you're . . . with someone now, maybe you're married, and that's great, but don't make me read a novel about how damn good your life is." I paused for breath. "I should get going."

I turned and walked out of the dining room, slamming the door behind me. Unlike what would have happened had this been a soap opera, I found myself faced with a locked garden gate. I was trapped in a no-man's land, wandering around plants in need of urgent attention and watching the sailboats and glass-bottomed tourist boats pass by.

"The gate's locked," I had to tell Laura when she appeared a few minutes later, cigarette hanging from her lip. "I didn't know you smoked."

"Only when I'm really nervous. Like now, you know?"

She said my name again and I said hers loudly, like it was a rightwing political slogan or something.

"Laura."

"What?"

"Can you open the gate? I want to go back to Barcelona."

She disappeared inside to get the keys and I thought about my father's cubes of dry ice. My head might not have been giving off smoke, but I could feel it melting, and not because of the heat: I was boiling with embarrassment and malaise and disgust and resentment. I was pure carbon dioxide.

"Stay a little longer. We haven't even eaten yet," she said, staring at the keys. She held them in her hand like a utensil, as if they might have been tempted to run away. "I don't want you to go like this."

"Today was supposed to be the best day of my whole crappy vacation," I lied. "I should have talked to you months ago. Words are meaningless now."

I contradicted myself after a brief silence, during which I gestured for a cigarette and she gave me one, lighting it with a gold-plated Zippo, by launching into an interminable speech built on the premise of self-pity. I talked about how I had subjected myself to self-imposed solitude when our relationship ended, the growing distance from my friends, the piece of shit website project. I even spent a few seconds on my injury from the ridiculous fall in the bathtub. Neither Kate nor Holly nor the worms made any appearance; I might have been desperate, but I was still aware that I shouldn't say anything about all the things that *didn't exist*.

After my monologue, I sat down in one of the dirty garden chairs. I was too exhausted to go back to Barcelona on the bus that would surely reek of After Sun, salt water, sour sweat, and belches brought on by reheated, beachside bar paella, so I accepted Laura's suggestion to go out to lunch in the port.

We sat at a tiny table and drank white wine as we waited for the *arroç* with clams, mussels, and monkfish. We were both planning to get drunk in an effort to transform our halting sentences into something resembling a fluid conversation. We were down to a quarter of a bottle by the time our food arrived. The clams were delicious, and the *sofrito* —thick and salty—helped the rice go down nice and easy, Laura said, before complaining that there weren't enough mussels. I sensed the real-life Ignacio behind her comments, a man of the world with expert opinions on every dish he'd ever tasted. I was so affected by the second bottle of wine that I imagined a bloated stomach, emitting brusque verdicts through its gastro-esophageal junction. Pronouncing itself a very sophisticated organ, it went on to proclaim:

"Taste should be radical."

The stomach would have continued its discourse if Laura hadn't repeated my name, pulling me back to reality.

"You were falling asleep! All of the sudden you closed your eyes and didn't open them!"

"It's the sun," I improvised.

We polished off the paella and Laura stood up to go to the bathroom. When I was alone, I downed the glass of wine and poured myself another.

"You told me Laura would answer the phone and you were right," I said, staring up at the sky. The sunlight was so intense that I saw spots, toastier brown than the worms in our kitchen had been, but perfectly acceptable for conducting a short philosophical exchange. "What should I do now? Are you going to tell me how to fix this mess?"

I concentrated intently on receiving their message, which didn't come.

"It's like we're attending each other's funeral, not meeting up again."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Laura approaching the table.

"Were you just talking to yourself?"

"Not at all," I explained. "I was having a very interesting conversation."

"Are you … okay?"

"Forget it. It isn't important."

Eyes closed, the solar worms dancing beneath my eyelids, I launched into a new lament about my present situation. Laura withstood it stoically. Even I was sick of myself when I got to the end of my little speech.

"If I was brave at all, I would go to New York, too. I'd look for a job in a bar or supermarket and spend my free time wandering around the city. You and I could even get together some day, couldn't we? We'd go out for a burger and fries. I would allow myself an indiscriminate use of hot sauce."

"I could take you to Chinatown. I think you'd like it. They have the wildest dishes! Crabs you eat whole, the shell and everything. Bird's nest soup. Turtle jello. They even cook jellyfish."

Later, as we drove back to Barcelona, I let myself imagine Laura and I becoming lovers. She would sneak out behind Ignacio's back, tell him that she was going to yoga, instead coming to see me in my ridiculous rented room in Harlem, and after a few brief, silent encounters—not unlike the ones she described with my fictional lover in her novel—we'd free ourselves and try new things, variations of what I had already done with Kate and Holly.

While still at the restaurant, delirious with thoughts of a possible—and improbable—new phase of life, I had moved in toward Laura, intent on kissing her. She stopped me, a finger pressed to my lips. I imagined the scene happening in slow motion: I watched as Laura repeated the very same words the first worm that lifted its head had uttered, just as I was about to squash it with a paper towel. Looking me square in the eye, it had said:

"Don't you dare."