

ENGLISH TITLE

Construction Material

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ORIGINAL TITLE:

Eraikuntzarako materiala

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Good thinking always happens at the moment of speechlessness.

Donna Haraway

*It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you,
even if it be by your forgetfulness or silence.*

Maurice Blanchot

tr Ann Smock

I

December 5, 2018

I am next to Dad in a special room of the hospital stroke unit. Only one person is allowed in at any time. He's never been a fan of crowds, so it won't bother him. It doesn't bother us either. The only way he and I will be able to talk is if we're alone—him unconscious and me terrified. Earlier, when I arrived, Aunt Lourdes and Mom were already with him. The nurses made an exception and let all three of us in together, only this one time. We didn't show the least bit of affection toward each other. We didn't kiss, hug, or touch. Functional phrases only: what happened, he slept on the couch last night because his back hurt, he ate breakfast this morning as usual, he left the office at eleven, they called from the auto repair shop, he didn't want to get in the ambulance.

When the doctor said he'd had a stroke and that the next few hours would be decisive, we went quiet. There were no tears, no shaking hands, we didn't huddle together—just silence. A technical question:

“When you say ‘the next few hours’ what do you mean exactly? Two hours? Twenty-four? Forty-eight?” We don’t want to be a nuisance, so we ask a silly question to dispel the silence.

“I mean the next few hours. We need to stop the bleeding. But his liver problems”—the power of language, thirty plus years condensed into two words—“make an already serious situation more complicated. He doesn’t have many platelets left. We’re going to give him more, but his pancreas. . . Let’s see how his body responds.”

The rocks clamor in the desert.

Death begins to stir.

“One last thing. This unit adheres to special rules. The patient needs peace and quiet, so it’s one visitor at a time.”

It’s better this way. We get under each other’s skin. When more than one of us is together, we make things worse for everyone, including ourselves. Our unspoken family constitution is especially draconian in the section that pertains to emotions.

Article 18.2: You will not cry in public, except in the case of death. In which case:

- a) Tears will function as emotional drainage.
- b) Tears will be limited to the situation at hand and will under no circumstance extend in time.

Article 18.3: You will not trade in pain.

- a) Any and all demonstrations of physical responses to pain are strictly forbidden.
- b) Pain will not be used for blackmail, and it is just as contemptible to commit blackmail as it is to be a victim of pain-based blackmail.

Article 18.4: Exceptions:

- a) Crying over a piece of fiction is an inalienable right, so long as you compose yourself once the piece has ended.
- b) All expressions of love, excitement, tenderness, and sympathy are strictly forbidden, except in interactions with animals and children under six.

The only place in which the law can be broken without fear of legal repercussions is in moments of intimacy.

Dad and I are alone now. It's noon and I broke the rules for a minute. I stroked his hair, touched his arm. The hair on his head and body is soft.

I've never seen him from this close.

It's strange. Even though Mom and my aunt aren't related by blood, a long time ago, they both swore to uphold the same constitution. Yet while my father is the nexus between these two women, he is the only one who hasn't taken this oath. It's hard to say which of them is the native and which is the foreigner who has to give in and live according to the other's values, rights, and responsibilities in order to be naturalized.

December 6, Day of the Constitution in Spain

"I can't get them to understand me" is the only phrase we heard him say all day, after "barbarbar chocolate barbarbar chocolate."

December 7, 2018

He's talking now. He can move all his limbs too. He has an awful headache. It's like he's been somewhere else and not in this hospital room. It's like he woke up in another place. I'm happy.

He tells me they found him against a tree, in his car, on the side of the highway between Oyarzun and Rentería, that he'd been to the auto shop to pay for a repair and they rushed him to the hospital.

December 8, 2018

I fed him today. First purée, then yogurt. I fed him with a level of devotion that I never experienced when feeding my own children.

We cleaned the plate.

I took one of the cloth handkerchiefs Mom left for him on the side table, next to a bottle of Loewe, and with a corner slow and gently wiped his lips, as if putting the final touches on a painting I wasn't ready to finish.

I placed my hands on either side of his face.

You ate all your food.

I said.

You were hungry.

I said.

You'll get better.

I said.

As I spoke to him, I looked into his eyes for the first time in my life. I don't know if he understood me, but he held my gaze.

I am ashamed to write about my father.

In the Navarro-Lapurcian dialect, the word for *fear* is *lotsa*, which also means embarrassment or shame. In Mexico and Colombia, embarrassment is *pena*. In English, Spanish, and French, embarrassment resembles the Spanish word for pregnancy, though in Basque, *enbarazu* means several things, including *nuisance*, *annoyance*, or *problem*. The most distant relative of this word appears to be *embaraçar*, from Portuguese or Asturian, which means something like a

rope. Later, in Portuguese, as well as Asturian and Galician, the word would come to mean something like the Spanish *preñar*, or *to get pregnant* or *fill* or *swell*. In Basque, the word for *preñar* can be both *bete* and *kargatu*.

I don't believe in synonyms. I don't believe in translations.

I must simulate silence to ensure words have meaning. Yet even the most realistic silence is no guarantee.

Maybe it's all down to a language problem. Since the beginning of time.

December 19, 2019

They've discharge him but he's not allowed to go back to work. They've told him he needs rest, maybe he should consider retiring. I stopped by his house on my way back from Donostia. I found him asleep in the armchair, lying back with his legs stretched out in front of him.

An issue of *El Diario Vasco* lay open to the crossword puzzle on the table. His reading glasses were on top of it. I picked up the newspaper and noticed the letters were outside the corresponding squares, though the answers were correct. "Little trickster: imp," Hit hard: slug," "Implore: plead." I never imagined he'd be able to do crosswords right after getting out of the hospital. His handwriting is different.

His hair is boyish, mussed, the color of tobacco. I feel embarrassed watching him sleep.

Mom woke him up when she yelled his name from the front door. She told him to wake up, I'd come to visit.

He looked at me with surprise, like he didn't know me. It's not the first time he's done this. He told me about the accident again.

One of his eyes has started bulging now because of the pressure buildup

from the bleeding. His speech is fairly clear, though slower than normal. When he can't find a word, he struggles with his lips.

Did you see?

He says and points at the newspaper.

My hand shakes so much I can't hold the pen.

He says.

Later in the kitchen, Mom tells me that everything Dad sees is sliced in half, from top to bottom. She also tells me things aren't looking good. "Lucky us. It had to happen now, of all times." When Mom says *now* in reference to my father, what she means is Since Dad Quit Drinking.

She has filled a glass with milk.

Take it to him.

She says.

I've never seen Dad drink milk before.

The French term for when a person decides to stop consuming something is *sevrage*, as in *sevrage tabagique* or *sevrage alcoolique*. The same word, *sevrage de l'allaitement*, is used to refer to the cessation of breastfeeding, whether for animals or humans.

December 21, 2021

Christmas isn't for another four days and I'm already in a foul mood.

There is nothing more normative than Christmas. Not even weddings, where unexpected things often happen in bathrooms.

I know for a fact how things will go. Dad will start unwrapping his presents but get bored before he's done and drop the partially wrapped gift on the floor. "Very nice," he'll say, even though it's still unopened. Meanwhile, we'll keep on giving each other presents, as if the simple act of continuing this ritual gave us access to another place. If the present is a shirt, he won't unfold it. If it's a sweater, he won't touch it. If the gift is a pair of shoes, he won't try them on. The only thing he will make time for is the perfume. I will give him perfume. I will spritz this perfume into the air and the smell will soothe the pain I feel at having to continue sitting by his side.

I was born into a barbaric family in which the mother refuses to lie, even when the truth is terrifying, and in which the father asserts his right to hate with a vengeance. Both my mother and my father were tenacious advocates of truth and anger.

My father was a drunk, even though I know better than most that the word *drunk* means next to nothing. Its only purpose is to classify, to separate those who drink a lot and badly from those who drink a little and well. According to Aristotle, classification is key to attaining knowledge, just as speaking, even when we use tired words, is the only rope that can tie all of this together. Even though we can't help it, the word *drunk* means virtually nothing—because not all drunks are equal, a drunk is made, and even the biggest drunk of all isn't always drunk.

I'm a kid. We wake up late and I miss the bus. Mom calls Dad at work and asks him to take me to school. She can't drive and refuses to learn. A quarter hour later, Dad, who is always well-disposed, rings the doorbell. He's at the gate, car parked on the sidewalk, waiting. He's already drunk.

I don't take my eyes off the road. There is a mix of smells: the leather of my father's bomber jacket, the pine of the air freshener, the alcohol. From that day on, I won't be able to tell them apart. Leather jackets smell like alcohol, pine air fresheners smell like leather, and the smell of new cars will invariably remind me of my father.

We've made it to school. It's like he can sense how I feel. He doesn't walk me to class but stays in the car, far away from the teachers.

I'm a kid and I never go to other kids' houses. God knows what kinds of people their parents are, there are all sorts of pigs out there. Because I never go to their houses, they barely ever come to mine, though I manage to sneak a friend in now and then. Dad comes home drunk as a skunk and walks into my bedroom. My friend and I are sitting on the bed. He strokes her hair, then leans over and gives me a big, sloppy kiss. He tickles me under the arms, pushing me back in bed. Coochiecoochiecoochie, he slurs. He can't move his fingers very quickly, and it hurts.

I'm a kid and I go to this same friend's house. We're in the kitchen having a snack when her dad comes home from the hills and leans against the sink to clean the mud out of the soles of his boots with a toothpick. He washes his wool socks and hangs them on the faucet to dry. He walks barefoot through the houses with his pants rolled up. When he sees me, he greets me by name. He is the perfect man.

I'm a kid and my friend and I are on Calle Viteri, the main street in town. It's where fancy people or people who wish they were fancy stroll around in their Sunday best, if they believe in Sundays. This is a treacherous part of town for me because at the time Dad is still day drinking in the local bars. I have to cross the street to get home. I see the back of a man in a leather bomber jacket, staggering like a cartoon drunk in the middle of the street. I know it's my dad. It's like I'm the only person who can see him. I keep chatting with my friend, who doesn't realize this man is my father. We go around him, still chatting.

I'm a kid.

An enormous white duck, around two or three times my size, wearing a gondolier hat and an emerald-green bow tie. Until now it's been no more than a presence, an annoying ghost. I've been seeing it for a few years now, and while

I can't make it disappear, at least I know what it is: a giant duck in a straw hat and a ridiculous bowtie.

Shame is tied to morality and conscience. It's tied to censorship, the other's gaze, and doubts about whether we deserve to be loved. Its symbol is a stain—one that can't be washed out, the object of every stare. I once read a tailor say that all that separates the sublime from the humiliating is half a millimeter, so there you go.

Dad told me that if you want to find out how neat someone actually is, you have to look inside their books because they hold a person's essence. The reason for this is that reading is a solitary act and we are only truly ourselves when alone. At the time he was talking about textbooks and the stains and smudges that might be hidden in them, or at least that's what we both thought.

The thought is so narcissistic it would be a shame to be embarrassed.

Shame can ruin a person's sense of self. It can reduce their whole existence to a flaw, and no matter what anyone says or does, they will believe for the rest of their lives that the whole world thinks they're less desirable than a worm. They are so vulnerable, so wounded, that all they want is to die without making a sound, to be swallowed by the earth, in a blistering dream of self-destruction, disexistence.

To disappear, retreat, hide. I start swimming at the age of nine, and I will swim almost every day for nine years. I get to the gym changing room every day at seven A.M. The smell of bleach and chlorine belongs to me. I have chronic otitis, which means I have to wear custom-made silicone earplugs. When I pull on my swim cap, all I can hear is water and my breathing. In the pool I try to distinguish the different sounds: the impact of a person diving in the water, bubbles floating from the bottom of the pool to the surface, the joyous splashing, the currents that seductively clear the way, and my favorite sound of all—the furtive, sad, and somehow beautiful sound of my body slicing through the water, particularly when my strokes are especially precise. We swim two

kilometers at practice, and my strengths are crawl and butterfly, short distances and power. Even though I win a few medals, I never display them in my room. On the one hand, I'm too vain for that kind of cheap bluster; on the other, it makes me angry not to have an audience to admire them.

Recently, in a feat of domestic warfare—against the ego, ostensibly— I threw them all in the trash. I still swim every summer. I do the butterfly stroke until it tires me out, and given that it's such a splashy style, I make sure no one is around to see me. Every year I try to tap into that strength. Deep down, I think I may be trying to fly.

I get home shortly after ten P.M. Alone in the kitchen, I wolf down the food my mother made for me, and drink a can of Coca Cola. The kitchen is brown. Everything in it is brown, even the rims of the plates. I dry my hair and go to bed. I'm going to bed, I always say in a whisper. My bedroom wall is plastered with drawings I've made. My mother doesn't care. She says I'm imaginative, which is good. She doesn't waste time on trifles.

For years, I use swim practice as a way to kill the depressing hours between the end of school and when I get to go to sleep. In the best of cases, they're in the living room when I get home from practice, Mom watching TV and Dad sleeping it off. The living room is the only large room in the house. On the wall above the sofa a reproduction of *Guernica* hangs in a tin frame. The rest of the walls are cluttered with masks that my dad buys from the Senegalese street vendors when he's happy-drunk, which is increasingly rare. Mom doesn't like them.

It's not that I don't like them. I'm scared of them. God only knows what they're actually for.

She says, as she reaches out her arm, dusting them from afar.

There's also a whip on the wall resting on a series of nails, in the shape of a slalom.

In a corner of the living room is an L-shaped bar about two meters long. It's made of dark wood. One part is tiled while the other part is covered in a trellis-like structure, which makes it look a bit like a confession booth. Behind it is a mirror, and lined up against the mirror, drinks for special occasions: Patxaran in a beveled-glass bottle, champagnes with fine metal detailing, whiskey, cognac, brandy, aguardiente. The phone sits on the counter and there are shelves in the bar where we keep milk cartons, conserves, the iron with its sheet, a wine jug, a soda siphon, cartons of Winston cigarettes, and cans of Coca Cola.

In the worst of cases, Dad hasn't come home yet and I run the risk of bumping into him in the hallway. Dad announces his arrival: the key fights to enter the keyhole, injuring the wood. He's always been honorable enough not to ring the doorbell.

Control: I've found solace in orthography. Things can be good and things can be bad, and I side with good, with order and corrections, with knowledge and the elite. One day I corrected our Spanish-language teacher for misusing the plural form of *wild boar*: it's not *jabalís*, it's *jabalíes*. I want to distance myself from people who make mistakes. Morally, I am one step above them. I take pleasure in the mistakes of others. A person's whole future in a misplaced aitch. An addiction to drugs is the sweetest tragedy that could befall them. I feel sorry for my friends when they slip up and disdain strangers who can't spell. As a teenager, I snubbed an aspiring poet for reading in public: "You dreamed you flied."

I feel ashamed when my mistakes are underlined in red ink. It's confirmation that I don't deserve anything good. One day I spot an error in a delivery note on my dad's office desk. He forgot the accent on a word. Apart from that, his penmanship is lovely. I can't believe my eyes. Something falls to pieces inside me. But that thing isn't me; I'm safe. In that error lives a man I don't know.

I torture my fingertips with clothespins, hiding my hands under a blanket. The wooden ones work best. In the beginning, it only takes a couple of minutes, but once I get used to the pain, I have to hold out even longer or I won't attain

actual pleasure. I can feel my heart pulsing on either side of the clothespin, pumping blood to my extremities. First my fingers turn purple. Then my hands go white. It's time. I unclip the clothespins one by one, relishing the catharsis. On my educational path to torture, reading will eventually replace clothespins.

Abuse: We're ten or eleven years old. There is a girl in class called Goizeder, who people say has "trouble at home." The schoolmate who takes Goizeder her homework when she isn't well told me she lives in a big, rundown house. This troubled girl piques my curiosity. She wears her hair in pigtails and ribbons that are far too childish for someone her age. Plus, she has a helper in class, an older man who often sits next to her. I can feel her embarrassment at the fact that she has to sit by a man too big for his desk, which looks toy-like in comparison. All of this screams something that should be unspoken: the poor girl is dumb, but let's pretend we don't notice. She looks scared all the time. I watch her voraciously eat her lunch, while trying to work out what kind of person she is. Sometimes she brings in dark chocolate in tin foil or a tuna sandwich.

I ask my schoolmate to describe Goizeder's house, and she tells me that she sprints up the stairs because she's scared of the noises the steps make under her feet, that one of the windows is broken and sealed with cardboard, that besides her parents, she also lives with her grandmother and uncle, that Goizeder and her grandmother do all the chores while her mother and uncle sit on the sofa watching TV, and that it always smells so strongly of soup that she feels queasy when she leaves.

Her story doesn't satisfy my hunger, but that doesn't matter. I pretend to be shocked and repulsed. One day she will show me the house from the outside. There is a single doorbell, which means no other families live in this building. I push open the front door. It's dark inside. A lightbulb hangs from a wire and the walls are carpeted. I walk into the foyer and sniff around for more information. My schoolmate tugs at my shirt sleeve because she wants to leave. But it's too late, I'm intoxicated.

I ask my mom what kind of trouble Goizeder has at home.

Her mother's a lush.

She says.

Not the dad, but the mom. It's so much worse that way!

She adds.

My dreams have come true. One day during recess, I will tell people that Goizeder eats cheese and wine for breakfast. My audience will swallow it up.

Cheese and wine?

They will swallow it up because they want to.

My lie will quickly spread all over school, reaching everyone who needs to know. I don't regret it, I am not kindhearted.

Later:

Just look at her. She's a potato!

Goizeder is too far to hear. I peer at her through half-closed eyes as everyone around me eagerly awaits what I'm about to say. Another toxic yet healing fabrication.

Her hair is the color of potato skin, her face is the color of potato insides, her body is the shape of potato.

Goizeder is the daughter of potatoes. From then on, we will call her Tater or Spud.

The lush's daughter is a potato who has wine and cheese for breakfast!

They will all say.

Laughter.

It's raining. School is over and we're standing outside. I tell Goizeder to open her mouth. There isn't much of an audience, just me and two other girls. She does what I say and then I carefully place the umbrella handle in her mouth. She bites down and it gets stuck. She starts walking in circles, then in and out of school, umbrella lodged in her mouth. I feel scared. No matter how hard I try, I can't get it out. The janitor, who saw everything, comes up to us. She tells Goizeder to relax, to breathe, then with a hard knock, retrieves the umbrella from her mouth, with no judgment toward me. Later, when we're alone, I laughingly apologize.

Next morning Goizeder's mother comes to the bus stop. It's the first time I've seen her there. She's tall and slender, unlike her daughter, with graying hair, sallow skin, wire-rim glasses, and a raincoat. She walks toward me with a black umbrella. When she reaches me, she closes the umbrella and thwacks me on the head. While she scolds me, I notice she is wearing pajamas underneath her raincoat.

You nasty girl! You've got no shame!

She yells.

Some of the other mothers at the bus stop crowd around her and tell her to calm down.

She's drunk. Her lips are thin, the shade of liver. The contrast between what her mouth says and her body emanates is unsettling.

Goizeder keeps her eyes fixed on the ground, hands laced together. She's a pariah.

After she leaves, some of the mothers ask me if I'm all right. They want to protect me from the lush.

Self-abuse: it's war. Dad doesn't talk, so neither do I. To fight silence with an even harsher silence. I practice the art of indolence. You may not cause me

pain, but you won't bring me joy either. I am a soldier and the soldier's superior. I've taken a vow of silence. This is my punishment, ostensibly. I say ostensibly because there is no such thing as silence, at least not while we're living. I can hear my body crunch and groan, I can't escape it. As I get ready for bed, just to check I haven't lost the ability to speak, I make a throaty sound that drives Mom crazy: m-m-m-m.

Will you shut up already?

M-m-m-m.

It's not easy balancing silence with rage, so I've decided to inflict harm on myself whenever I don't adhere to my standards of discipline. Even though I bleed on the inside, it's all be in vain: silence cannot be beaten with silence.

December 27, 2018

Dad was chattier than usual on Christmas Eve. He told us he was arrested once. Ever since Dad quit drinking two Christmases ago, I've listened with quiet veneration whenever he takes the floor, which doesn't happen often. He could say something important, something that makes everything make sense; he's never talked much, which I like to think of as an aesthetic choice. But we had no idea. That he'd been tortured, that he'd been terrified. Why hadn't he mentioned this before? "I couldn't." When we asked him to say more, he refused. "Grandma's hands have shook ever since, and it wasn't because of Parkinson's like everyone thought."

I still don't know what's behind this inability—trauma, a promise, a security measure, I have no idea. His face betrayed nothing that day. When he went to bed, we asked Mom if it was true that Dad was arrested. "Of course it's true." And when I asked why they never told us, she said Dad hadn't wanted to, and that she didn't know much more.

He's dying, that much I know. But who isn't?

Am I living or am I dying? Can a person do both things at once?

Mom likes World War Two movies, the “krauty flicks,” and so do I. Dad likes Westerns, the “cowboy flicks,” and so do I. Dad sits in the armchair, which has become his island, and I sit on the sofa with Mom. He is transfixed by these rambling men who believe the only law is honor, these men who down whiskey without wincing and feel nothing for the prostitutes who swan around them in the saloon.

He wants me to learn how to horseback ride.

What about you?

I ask.

No, not me.

He is much younger than I am now, and still handsome, and yet for some reason he thinks it’s too late for him to do anything.

We live in the center of town, up a hill, on the third floor of a five-story building. There are more buildings across from us and on either side, one next to the other. Aside from the family on the fifth floor, we don’t associate with our neighbors, and we don’t know any of the residents in the adjoining buildings, or in the building across the street. Many of these neighbors, the women especially, talk about their lives from their balconies and scream down at their kids, who are out in the arcade, to come home for their mid-afternoon snack. They don’t speak Basque and it isn’t unusual to see them out and about in slippers with a baguette under their arms. Their names are different from ours. Their hair is different from ours. We don’t wear cheap jewelry or plastic clips, and we don’t have long hair after a certain age—no, not us. Their shoes are different from ours. Mom has been teaching me about the differences between us since I was little. We aren’t noisy, they are. We don’t store bags of snails, mounds of sheep’s wool or kilos of salami on our balconies, they do. Their balconies are flush with geraniums that the women water, while our balcony is crowded with succulents

that my father looks after, even though they barely need it. We don't cook with paprika, bay leaves, or thyme. We don't vanish to our hometowns in the summer, this is the only town we have. In spite of our last names, our story begins here and now.

Junkies and punks hang out in the arcade of the building across the street. We see them shoot up a lot. Mom and I, from the window. They sit on the curb with their backs to us, and from up here we can see their pale arms stretched over their thighs, their hands opening and closing.

Mom tells me to stay away from needles unless I want to die of AIDS. I never take off my shoes on the beach until I find a place to stretch out my towel. The only punk we know by name is Cojo Manteca, a cripple with a single leg. I cross the punks on street corners, by the gym, under our apartment, and on the boulevard. When I see them, I look away and walk faster. My mother doesn't believe in heaven or hell; for her, Cojo Manteca is a walking representation of the worst thing that could ever happen to me. He's the first person I see on TV who I know in real life. He's being interviewed by Jesús Quintero, and more than the sound of our town's name in his mouth, what strikes me is the focus and interest with which Quintero listens to a guy like Cojo, who I'd always thought of as a bit of a loser.

Also look out for abandoned backpacks and trash bags.

One day this boy kicked a bag with an ETA bomb in it. And another one loses a leg.

Mom says every time.

I've noticed that whenever Mom talks about some disastrous event or other, she always starts her sentence with "and another one," as if all misfortune were another link in a chain of fatalities.

Mom and I wait at the window for Dad to come home with less and less patience and tenderness every day.

To the left there's an empty lot, and to the right is Mount Jaizkibel. Every morning we gaze at it for a while. As we peer out the window, we try to forecast what kind of day we're going to have. Will there be a storm, cold weather, will the clouds break? Every other day, the mountain is on fire. At night we watch it burn, haunted by a sadness that doesn't fully belong to us.

At the bottom of the hill to our house, there is a new PSOE office. I don't know this yet, but I will see this burn place often too.

Dad has taken me to the mountains, to the cabin of the man who is going to teach me how to ride horses. I am still convinced that all people who live in the mountains speak Basque, but I'm wrong this time; this man doesn't. He is shirtless and wears a pair of dirty jeans and rubber boots. His mustache is thick, and he has a tangle of jet-black hair. Judging by the amount of courtesy he shows me, I figure he owes my dad a favor. Later on I will discover that he'd been through Proyecto Hombre.

My baptism in horseback riding will be to ride up and down the mountainside outside the cabin without a saddle, gripping the horse's mane. Even though I'm terrified, I don't show it, because the man told me that if I got scared, the horse would be scared too. I look around for Dad, but don't see him. The man with a mustache stands in front of me with his arms crossed and his legs planted apart, watching me. We're alone. We wind up spending most of the afternoon alone as he teaches me to trot. We cross a stream without dismounting, though my dad isn't there to see it. Later that evening, exhausted, we take the horses back to the stable. After we've given them drinking water and slowly pet them, after we've brushed their manes and unsaddled them, we sit at a makeshift table fashioned out of a pair of oil drums and a couple planks of wood. The man brings out a pack of beer and some cans of Coca Cola from the cabin. The minute he opens a beer, Dad shows up. He downs two cans at a go. Though I don't know where he's been all day, I know it's not in the mountains. His shoes are spotless.

That night and many nights after, I will fall asleep thinking of horses.

To this day, whenever I go horseback riding, I wish he could see me, but he's never there. To this day, whenever I dismount, I feel the weight of my loneliness, of my own body.

Sometimes pain doesn't hurt.

My parents and half of Dad's family work at the construction supply store, which is named after my paternal grandmother. The store doubles as a warehouse. Everyone calls it a warehouse, even the people who work in the store and hardly ever step foot in the warehouse.

I work at the warehouse.

They all say.

My father, the eldest of five brothers, is in charge of management. At the store they sell everything needed to build a house: roof tiles, cement, sand, paving stones, bricks, rocks, floor tiles, gutters, roofing tar, ceramic, woodstoves, sinks, bathtubs, toilets, faucets, towel racks . . . The trucks come from the construction sites and back into the warehouse, then the men who work there, including my uncles, load the material into the truck with a Fenwick forklift. It's a masculine space: builders, plumbers, truckers, contractors, laborers, warehousemen, DIYers. . . They wear nankeen and t-shirts with ads on them, rubber gloves and cloth hats. If I were to bump into them one weekend, I doubt I'd recognized them. They've changed so much.

The warehouse is dark, and the few fluorescent bulbs around it don't light up the whole space. The walls are bare, and the wires and pipes exposed, leaving little room for the imagination. Mountains of cement and gravel sit at one end of the warehouse, as do piles of yellow and black building sand. A cloud of dust hovers over them. When school is out, the yellow sand will serve as my beach. I don't need much else. I will take a metal shovel that's too big for my small body and jam it into the various piles, measuring how far in I'm able to get with a single shove. When I want to bury it completely, I will push it down with my

foot. But the best part comes after, when I yank the shovel out in one go. I am King Arthur. This is how I will spend the afternoon and most of the summer. I also climb on the Fenwick with one of my uncles or other warehousemen: the teeth slide into the pallets; the loaded trucks are emptied and the empty trucks loaded. They squeeze into the warehouse and my uncles yell instructions at the drivers as they explain how to maneuver in without grazing the walls. When a truck comes in, the warehouse gets dark like night, and when it leaves, the warehouse gets light again.

An office space connects the store to the warehouse in a U-shape. We always dust ourselves off before going into the office, which has a skylight and plants that grow gently in every corner. There are four desks: one for Grandfather, another for Aunt Lourdes, one for Dad, and another for his cousin Maite. Even though he has retired, Grandfather shows up every day and carefully opens all the mail that comes in with a letter opener. He cuts out the intact stamps, and once he has collected four or five, fills the sink with warm water and leaves them in there to soak until they've been released from the small square of envelope. Finally, he dries them with a travel-sized hair drier and stores them in a plastic box next to the store-bought stamps. Next to the box is a moistener with a soft orange sponge top and water at the base. I help him attach stamps to the letters that people leave on his desk.

Don't even think of licking them. They're poisonous.

He says.

But I love the bitterness of the stamps, the novelesque danger. I've only ever known my grandfather as a a man on the verge of a mental breakdown. Later, when I first listen to *Lekeitios*, a 1988 experimental album by Mikel Laboa, they will sound familiar, seeing as I have regularly heard my grandfather speak in howls, yelps, and absurd repetitions. *What barbarité Antuanet*, he will say a thousand times. *What barbarité, Antuanet*. Or *La merde of Ponente*. And *Non é vero, piglet for the cooking pot*. Ballads and saetas inspired by nursery rhymes, a series of consonants that, through repetition, not only become logical but

gain new meaning. He will go swimming in the sea every day, be it summer or winter. He will drive to Donostia in his Dyane 6 convertible, even though he never puts the roof down; ostentation is not permitted in our family. As a norm, he doesn't eat animals, or sugar, or salt, or white flour. For breakfast he will have an entire head of roasted garlic, which he splits like a mandarin. His fingers are deformed from arthritis, as are his toes, and his feet are covered in protuberances, so that he can only wear custom-made shoes. The leather of the shoe hews so closely to his rugged feet that it looks like they harbor secrets. He wears a Burberry raincoat and brushes his abundant hair back with a pocket comb. He loves money and unrolls his many wads of cash just for the sake of counting, smoothing, and stroking them.

When you love someone, tell them.

He says.

So that they can choose to love you back.

Then he secretly hands me a bill. I always have money in my pocket, sometimes a lot for a girl my age. I spend some on sweets: cream-filled palmeras, chocolate popsicles, and cotton candy that I buy after school for my friends and me. I spend the rest at the stationer's: pencil sharpeners, notebooks, erasers, Rotring felt-tip pens. To stave off boredom, I write out different types and sizes of alphabets on graph paper.

Even though Dad manages the warehouse, on paper he isn't the manager, not until after they restructure the company. For now he is just the brother with a head for numbers. He is the epicenter of the office. There are stacks of perfectly aligned ring binders, piles of paper, a slew of catalogs of other construction supply stores, mosaic samples, letters, delivery notes. . . The pencil holder is covered in rubber bands that he finds during the week, on the egg carton for example. It makes me think of Kayan women. The image of the pencil holders splices and loops with that of a postcard stuck to one of the office windows that one of my uncles sent when he went to Myanmar on one of many trips.

Aunt Lourdes and my father are in charge of watering and tending to the dozens of plants scattered around the office and the store. After doing their rounds, they return to their respective desks, their hands full of dried leaves.

Grandfather has a metal typewriter; before long, Dad will get an electric Olivetti. He will set it on a roller table beside his desk, and if anyone wants to use it—his sister, his cousin, Mom, or me—he is happy to lend it to us.

Do you know how it works?

He will ask this question for years after he bought it.

Then he will fetch the roller table. He will get on all fours and plug it in underneath the table of the person who needs it. He will stand there and instruct them about how to insert the paper, until they finally turn it on and demonstrate they know how it works.

You'd better take the paper out and put it in again, nice and straight.