

AMAIA GABANTXO

Bele & Zozo

I WANT TO TELL YOU an unlikely story. I'd find it hard to believe if it hadn't happened to me, so I'll understand if you choose to take it with a pinch of salt. I assure you, however, that every word you're about to read is true. I hope you'll be able to take what you need for your own life from this tale.

It was early summer. A blue-skied day, breezy, bright. I lived in a ground-floor apartment nestled in the heart of an old Georgian building—it had been an orphanage in bygone times. The building was flanked on both sides by two medieval cottages without a single straight wall or window between them, and there were remnants of the ancient city walls behind the enormous fig tree facing my kitchen. Two hundred years old at least, judging from the size of it, maybe older than that; its figs were delicious—*uztapiku*, we call them, dark, fat, heavy, and sweet—though we only got good harvests at the end of the warmer summers. And one year not at all because they'd been raising a new apartment block in the vicinity, and I think the fig tree objected to all the dust and the noise. I often wondered about the ghosts of the many lives lived in the small but tightly packed square footage of my building. You could sense them. Their energy still in place. I loved living and writing there; I felt surrounded by millions of ongoing stories.

But maybe that's just the nature of the translator: to live simultaneous lives at once and to sense others for this reason. To live in the present and the past and the future. In the past of the texts we work from, in the natural present of our lives as they occur, and in the eternal and therefore future life of what we create. We don't create for the now, although we keep bringing past words to the now; we create for the ever, adding life to the life of the existing text. We perpetuate. That's maybe why we translators inhabit time and space slightly differently, because we're always working between planes of existence.

This effect is raised to the power of thousands when a translator translates another translator, as was the case on this particular day I speak of. I was translating an essay on the life and works of Bizenta

Mogel, the first published female Basque writer and translator; she translated Aesop's fables into Basque and published them in 1804, at the age of twenty-two. Her book was the first Basque bestseller and caused quite the scandal. Because she was so young and an orphan charged to her uncle's care, a famous writer himself—Joan Antonio Mogel. She published only months after his death. How dare she? A female, barely a woman, fatherless, motherless, riding the coattails of a dead uncle's fame. And yet. Hers was the first Basque publication to earn the right to be called an unmitigated success.

She worked from ancient Latin texts for her *Ipui onac*—*Good Tales*—even though it would have been easier to work from contemporary Spanish or French translations. She liked a challenge and, I suspect, to show off a kind of knowledge very few Basque women would have possessed at the time. Furthermore, she was said to be a healer and a witch, capable of communicating with the dead. People came to her for potions and spells and séances, as well as for her stories. She had added a few made-up fables—eight in fact—to her collection, passing them off as Aesop's own. Her intent in writing that book, she'd said, was to teach people how to live good lives: lives inspired by the lives of animals. She wanted everyone to be able to read her book, so—going against everything her learned uncle had taught her—she wrote it in vernacular Basque, the kind of Basque she heard people around her use, not the kind of high-flown Basque used in literary and ecclesiastical texts at the time. She annoyed so many people with *Ipui onac*. She did everything she wasn't supposed to do. Some critics intimated that the unsurpassed success of her book might have been the result of witchcraft.

I liked this woman a lot—my kind of translator, I thought. A transgressor, an infiltrator, a medium. Adding parts of herself to the life of the work. Transubstantiating herself into things, and things into herself. A shapeshifter. An inconvenient kind of woman.

THE RESTORATION OF MY BUILDING had turned what I imagine must have been the orphanage's play area into a communal courtyard, and my house was in the best spot: the center of it. Being green-fingered and from the Southern shores of this world, I had taken command of the entire courtyard, raising several beds for vegetables, growing all manner of herbs and plants and wild bushes in a diverse array of colorful pots, and contributing a cast-iron table and four chairs plus two deck

chairs, a barbecue, and a Mexican potbellied clay heater to the general décor. I was also in the habit of hanging my laundry out to dry when the weather permitted. I spent as much time as I possibly could in the courtyard—to the annoyance of some of my very British neighbors. One of them had stabbed a red, frilly T-shirt that was drying in the sun during an uncharacteristically warm day that spring.

On the summer day I'm referring to I was inside when I heard the noise. The windows were open, and it was the fear as much as the rattling that I sensed. A window rattling across the courtyard, as if it were being banged on by a desperate madwoman. I identified the source quickly, the window on the staircase to flat six. A high window in the landing between two long sets of stairs. A person would need to stand on its sill to rattle it. It didn't make sense.

I approached, unsettled, and observed the window from the courtyard. There was no one there, but the window was definitely rattling, I could see it move, the noise of it so loud. Something was wrong. The window was very tall, huge, around eight or ten feet high. I could see shadows moving at the top of it. Banging on it.

I crossed the courtyard, entered the building, and walked up the staircase. No one there. The windowsill was waist-high and the window very old, probably as old as the building—around three hundred years old. It was clear that most of the glass panes in the twelve-pane sash of the double-hung window were made of hand-blown glass. In the rebuild, they had double-glazed all the Georgian windows in the orphanage by placing simple, stainless-steel guillotine windows in front of them. The fix created a five-inch chamber between the old and the new glass. I imagined Emma, who lived in flat six with her baby, had raised the guillotine a few inches to air the staircase. That's how I found things. That's how the birds got in.

They were trapped. Two young birds, a baby crow and a baby thrush. They were hysterical, thrashing desperately between the two panes, instinct driving them to fly up and up and harder and harder—the worst thing they could possibly do. I heaved myself up to stand on the windowsill and raised the guillotine as far as it would go (exactly half the length of the window). The baby birds noticed my presence and grew even more hysterical, fluttering harder and trying to fly higher—even though there was nowhere higher to go. I could see the rescue operation would not be easy. The top of the window, where the birds were, was still three or four feet away from my raised hands,

which I was waving between the two panes, hoping to catch the birds' attention. I started to talk. "What are you doing here, hey? How did you get yourselves there? Shhhh, it's going to be all right. Look here, come down, come here, birdies." I spoke softly, trying to soothe them into taking notice of me and seeing that I was their way out. But it wasn't working. They were going to wear themselves out and die of heart attacks. I knew birds could easily die of stress. As I stood there in the window—legs and arms akimbo, the madwoman manifest—the strangeness of the situation dawned on me. How indeed had those two birds gotten there? They had to have flown inside the building first and then into the space between the two window panes. Quite the feat. Two baby birds of different species did this. Together, at the same time. Since when did crows and thrushes go on adventures together? It was like something out of an Aesop fable.

Aesop's fables. Aesop in Basque. Now I knew what to do, standing there in the Georgian window. Bizenta manifested. "Zu! I said, Zu, Bele!" I addressed the crow in Basque. My words shocked the crow. It immediately turned around and flew downward toward my outstretched arms, hovering in front of me in doubt, flapping its wings, with surprised eyes. "Bele jauna," I said then, changing my tone, addressing it formally, echoing Bizenta Mogel's translations—which I'd just been reading—and in acknowledgement of the well-documented Basque respect for Mr. Crow's intelligence: "Zatoz hona, etorri nirekin eta goaz kanpora, utzi laguntzen Bele jauna." Allow me to help you, come to me, and let's go outside, Mr. Crow, I said. As soon as I had uttered those words in Bizenta's and my magical mother tongue, the little crow flew into my hands. Just like that. I cupped it there in disbelief for a moment, feeling its heartbeat between my interlaced fingers, in the palms of my hands, all the way up my wrists and arms. The crow kept very still. I leaped to the landing and walked us down the staircase and through the long corridor out of the orphanage, releasing Mr. Crow into the air as soon as I had crossed the threshold. I thought it would fly up and away from the courtyard in relief, but it didn't. Despite my attempt at releasing it up into the sky, the crow drew a downward parabola and landed on the grass instead, and then hopped quickly all the way into my butterfly bush, under which it hid, watching me. Exhausted, I thought. It needed to rest its wings, I thought. I ran back into the building and up the staircase to help the thrush.

"Zozo!" I said, "Zozo, txiki hori, zatoz hona!" The crow had

understood Basque; the thrush would too. Little thrush—I said—come with me. But the thrush isn't as clever as the crow (this is also a well-documented Basque fact), and it's also more nervous. This one kept flying high into the furthest corner of the window, flapping desperately against the glass. "Kokolo," I said then, "horrela ez goaz inora: lasaitu zaitetz." You fool, we can't go anywhere if you're like this; catch your breath, I cajoled. "Zozo, kokolo, txiki hori, zatoz nirekin," I kept saying, as sweetly as I could. I could hear Bele cawing from inside the butterfly bush, entreating its friend to trust me. "Zozo, kokolo, txiki hori, zatoz, kokolo, zozo." It took a while, but it finally gathered its courage, the silly thing, and hurled himself at me, and I caught it. It chirped hysterically inside my hands throughout it all, the drama queen. "Lasai, lasai," I whispered, "bagoaz." I was certain it would shit in my palms. I got us outside and released it quickly into the air, and the thrush, unlike the crow, didn't think of landing on the grass and hiding in the butterfly bush to keep an eye on things and make sure its friend was okay; all it could think was to fly out of there as fast as it could, which it did, and in the few seconds it took me to cross the threshold and release Zozo into the air, Bele hopped out from inside the butterfly bush and leaped into the air to join its friend. "Agur, Bele, jauna," I shouted into the sky, "Agur, Zozo, kokolo hori." Bye, Mr. Crow. Bye, thrush, you dumb fool. And Zozo quickly disappeared beyond the roofs, but Bele, its faithful, thoughtful, clever friend, paused on an eave momentarily, and turning its head to look at me cawed five times, caw-caw-caw-caw-caw, before taking off into the bright blue breezy sky.

"Eskerrikasko," I understood immediately.

It takes five syllables to say thank you in Basque.

Ikasi bear degu Ipui onekin, artu bear dirala ondo nai digutenen
ta jakitunen itz edo esan zuzengarriak. Ez jakiñak asko galdu ditu,
ta gorde ere bai burua galtzetik; norbaitek erakutsi dioelako erorgarri,
edo irriskua: Bada

Lagun jakitunari jarraitu,
Bere itz onak pozik artu.

When I walked back into my study, the closing lines of "The Tale of the Birds and the Bird-Hunter" were still flickering on my computer screen: "The lesson to be learned from this tale is that we must listen to those who wish us good, and to the righteous words of wise people. Foolishness has been the cause of many losing their ways, and wisdom

has kept many others from losing their heads—because someone was able to show them their mistake, or the danger they faced: and so I say,

Follow your wisest friends
their good advice leads to happiness.

The fable tells the story of a bird hunter who tries to deceive the forest birds into falling into his traps. Some of the sillier birds are keen to fly blindly and unknowingly into the bird hunter's nets, but the crow warns its friends of the hunter's intentions, and between them they set a trap to catch and trap him instead.

I WAS DELIGHTED when a family of thrushes set up home in my butterfly bush shortly thereafter. They built a nest and hatched their eggs deep inside the bush, and that summer three little thrushlings grew and thrived and learnt to fly there. I spent many more hours than I should have watching their thrush parents constantly fly in and out of the bush with worms and other tasty, crawly delights hanging from their beaks (taking turns, one would always stay with them in the nest). I watched those thrushlings go from pink to gray to speckled brown, from featherless yawning fragile tiny little things to half-blind maddeningly loud and demanding fluffy Fraggles-like creatures, then to bickering competitive chubby and clumsy quasi-flying torpedoes that barely fit inside their nest. That year the bush gave more blooms than ever, inviting daily parties of butterflies to hang around my courtyard, and the fig tree provided such a huge crop of figs that I spent weeks making jam for everyone.

A few weeks after the encounter with the thrush and the crow, I had a very strange dream, one that bled into real life. In the dream a biblical flood reached the courtyard, something apocalyptic. I could see the water rising up threateningly, but I found two silver manholes on the grass, one decorated with birds and the other with fish. I knew if I opened them we'd be saved from the flood. Leila, my upstairs neighbor—a mousey, shy girl—came to help me open the manholes and afterward asked if she could borrow my ladder, because she had locked herself out of her flat. I lent her my ladder and held it while she climbed.

I would have forgotten the dream, but the following afternoon Leila actually rang my doorbell and asked if I had a ladder she could borrow, saying she had locked herself out of her flat. The dream re-

turned to me like a flash of lightning, and I said, “This is weird, I dreamt this last night, you coming to my door to ask for a ladder.” She laughed nervously. Unlike in the dream, in real life I didn’t have a ladder, but I offered to help her climb into her bedroom window through the fire escape. I’d hold her hand while she inched along the ledge from the fire escape to her window. We went up the fire escape, and I noticed her bedroom window was wide open, the security lock hanging loose down the middle of the window frame, as if she’d left it like that on purpose, so she’d be able to climb back inside. Had she escaped through the window and needed help getting back in? Had her boyfriend taken her keys and trapped her in? Is that what was happening? I had an inkling that it was. I wanted her to tell me what was going on, but more than anything I wanted her to know that I would help her, no questions asked. She’d tell me when she was ready—if she ever was.

A madwoman in a window again, I thought as we proceeded, remembering my recent scene with Zozo and Bele. Only on this occasion I was helping a bird back into her trap. I liked Leila and worried about her. My neighbor—the one who’d stabbed the frilly red shirt that was hanging out to dry—lived there with her. Her boyfriend. He was an abuser. On another occasion, he’d hurled a plant pot at me from that very window, after I’d shouted at him from the courtyard to stop mistreating her. I called the police on him, but they washed their hands of the situation, saying that his father, an upstanding member of the city’s high society, a doctor from an old family, had guaranteed nothing like that would ever happen again. I reminded them that he’d already stabbed my clothes, and that he continuously abused Leila—and that I’d denounced him several times. He’d even chased another neighbor down the street with a knife: Alex the trans video game designer in flat ten, a scrawny tattooed kid barely out of teenagehood. Leila’s boyfriend was violent and dangerous; we knew it and they knew it. But they weren’t willing to protect us, two young foreign women and a queer kid. They asked what the value was of the red shirt he stabbed, and if I wanted to sue him for it. I resented the cups of tea I’d made for them as they sat there in my living room, condemning us all to live in fear of his increasingly dangerous attacks.

Holding Leila’s hand tight as she navigated the ledge and got back into her house, I thought of Bizenta Mogel. How she had to apologize to be who she was, for being a young girl writing in disguise

iñoren lumaz janzi nai duela bela-txikiak (like a jackdaw wearing someone else's plumage), for daring to publish her book under her own name—and not a male *nom de plume* like so many other female writers of her generation. How she refused the diktat of a traditional life—motherhood, invisibility, abnegation. At a time when women were described both in scripture and law as weak but dangerous, she chose to openly lean toward the dangerous side of the equation. Protected, no doubt to an extent, by the privilege of her distinguished literary lineage. And yet, despite her name and lineage, she had to fight her nephew in court to recover the wealth she lost upon her husband's death—wealth she'd contributed to with her dowry as well as her publications. The nephew's blood relation was more valuable, in the eyes of the law, than years of marriage and collaboration (her husband owned a printing press; they'd edited and published books together throughout their lives). She won, eventually, two years before her death at the age of 72.

In her preface to *Ipuì onac Bizenta* referred to herself as a jackdaw, but Vargas Ponce, the director of the Academia de la Historia de Madrid, in awe of Bizenta's intellect after meeting her, entreated her uncle Joan Antonio Mogel in a letter “not to thwart the flight of such a majestic eagle—privileged spirits don't dwell among common ones.” He encouraged Bizenta's uncle to put no limits on her education despite her being a woman. We know that her uncle tried to, however, worried that she was flying too high. To no avail. Bizenta could only be Bizenta. As I mentioned, she took a very disobedient approach to her translations of Aesop's fables. Nowhere is this more evident than in her translation of “The Tale of the Fox and the Grapes.” In his fable Aesop hinted that those who can't do something they want to do (the fox can't reach the juicy grapes) excuse their inadequacy behind a disregard for the very thing they covet (the grapes are sour, decides the fox). Aesop's lesson alludes to the ridiculousness of fake pride. But Bizenta Mogel's Basque translation reveals a very different teaching from the fable. In her version the fox muses that it's perhaps lucky it can't reach the grapes after all, because they might make him sick as they seem green, and she closes the fable with the following explanation: “The lesson to be learned from this tale is that we must be wise enough to recognize the things that we can't do. That it's good not to always be able to do things, because we can learn from such experiences, and, once we do, become capable of doing what we

couldn't before." Bizenta's lesson being that it's important to realize that our limitations are not always permanent.

Thinking of this as I facilitated her safe return into her cage, I realized that Leila had probably been locked inside her house many, many times before without my noticing it. But she had learnt to escape.

A COUPLE OF NIGHTS after my dream and real-life encounter with Leila, while I was translating that long-overdue book of literary essays on Basque authors, I heard the food waste disposal unit in my upstairs neighbors' apartment run all night.

Earlier I had heard Leila and her boyfriend have an almighty fight, all crashes and bangs; I was on the verge of calling the police on him once again when Zee, my Angolan neighbor, a mountain of a man, scary-looking but immensely kind, took matters into his own hands and clambered up the stairs and hammered on the door demanding to know that Leila was okay. She had eventually opened the door, shaking like a leaf in turbulence and with eyes wild like Atlantic gale storms—so Zee had reported—and said that everything was fine, that she was fine. Zee and I had sat in my apartment, drinking some of his homemade kissangua to soothe our nerves and that sense of being lost in windy seas, given what we'd felt had gone on upstairs, but things now seemed quiet and eventually he went home to his wife and child. I started hearing the whirr and munch of the waste disposal unit around 1:00 a.m. It went on all night. I was still translating at 7:00, and the waste disposal was still at work too. It stopped around 8:00. I took a shower and went to bed.

I saw Leila a couple of days later, resplendent in an orange and gold sari, a red bindi between her eyes. She came to sit with me in the courtyard. I'd never seen her like that before, in traditional dress. "You look so beautiful," I couldn't help saying, holding her hand. She beamed at me, squeezing my hand back. She wasn't mousey at all, I realized, she was a tigress. Not a jackdaw but an eagle, like Bizenta.

"I'm leaving," she said. "Thank you so much for everything." I made us tea and served some hazelnut orange-peel cookies I'd made. We contemplated the thrushlings tweeting meekly in their cozy nest hidden inside the butterfly bush. They were so small. "They'll be okay here," Leila said. "They're safe."

That was the last time I saw her. The police came by several times to ask if I had seen or knew anything about the doctor's missing son or

his girlfriend. I said no. The thrushlings survived to become thrushes and took off later in the summer, and one day in early September I saw an adult crow watch me from the roof while I sat at my cast-iron table, translating some medieval poems.

Caw-caw-caw-caw-caw, it said.