Lección de anatomía, Marta Sanz / The Anatomy Lesson trans. Sophie Hughes, c. 2014

LEARNING TO TELL THE TIME

It took me a long time to learn to tie my shoelaces. That's why I was always an attentive student in class, consciousof my shortcomings in maths, and of my total lack of aptitude for sewing. There is no more sinister image than that of a little girl, needle and thread in hand, concentrating, bringing her needlework up close to her eyes, pretending to be someone else, taking on the twisted stoop of a short-sighted little old lady. Learning, discovery, delightful puzzlement, a curious disposition, the beautiful words which lead us to thepainof enlightenment; all of this puts us on shaky ground, not because of what we do not know, but rather how much it takes us to learn it: it's embarrassingto expose one's own inadequaciesin front of a teacher, whose acceptance you crave; acceptance, and in the most neuroticchapters of your childhood, even admiration. It took me a long time to learn to tie my shoelaces, and my mother pulled her hair outtrying to teach me algebra and decimal figures. I've forgotten all of it save formy own wounded pride and my mother's disappointmentat my clumsiness and bovinity.

Hence, theknot that appeared in my stomach when I realisedthat the time for me to have to learn to tell the time was drawing close; I had to get in before my first holy communion,before beingpresented with an object of absolutely nouse to me.

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—Teach me to tell the time, teach me.

Isenselessly begged my elders to teach me, nagging them, following them around the house, not giving them a moment's rest after meals. And then, the mystery was unravelled–though the fear stayed– and everything took on a new meaning: ten to, ten past, before and after the large hand crosses the threshold of twelve, the quarter-pasts, the half-pasts. On and on like that, until now, today,when I exist in a permanent hour-on-the-dot which allows me to wander through the streets of my city as if I were a tourist. I go to empty cinema screenings atcut price. I don't take public transport or movemechanically from one side of town to the other. I don't care if it's five or twenty-to, I'm in no hurry to get anywhere; I merely walk to stretch my legs and help the time pass. I go down dead ends and while away the timecontemplating an orphanagethat was builtaround the time of the Second Republic; I can hang around in the parks in the outskirts, or in the pharmacy on the corner of San VinceteFerrer with San Andrés, taking pleasure in the adverts for "harmless smokeables", permeable bandages, *DiarretilJuansé*, the coloured tiles that appear in some of the Madrid tourist guides. I can go the extra mile for my loaf of bread, or pop into a free exhibition. Now I only care about the time on behalf of others, and, even though I can't afford to buy expensive shoes or order a *tapas*of prawns with a beer, I'm ashamed to say I'm getting close to achieving happiness, despite the fact that finding myself with all the time in the world has elicited amild levelof hypochondria.

Perhaps it's that there is no need to learn to tell the time, or that, just as it took me a long time to learn to tie my shoelaces, I still haven't quite mastered

how to read the position of the hands, and these strange activities that I make myself do to come out from my shell are part of a learning process. What I'm writing now is a way of going onlearning how to tell the time, even if I still can't control thetimeenough tohave a hold on it and decide whether it's better to write in the morning or at night; tounderstand that it's that pressure, drawn out over the dying hours of the afternoon, that prevents me fromsleeping. And the thing is,it took me a long time to learn to tie my shoelaces, and in school I was one of those good students who believes everything she's told. Taking a long time to learn to tie our shoelaces forcesus to look for strategies to cover up our failings, like the blind men who pretend to see so that no one takes advantage of them. Learning to tell the time, the swinging resistance, the vertigo and the morbid desire for any kind ofwisdom, especially that wisdomaround time and its positions, does not have to do with the fear of dying, but rather with the perception of a happiness that consists in being grateful, in looking for a middle ground between humility and pride, and in learning how to waving goodbye to childhood. A happiness I now claim and defend, aware of having released myself from certain ties while I held on tighter and more willingly to the Gordian knot of others. The time is twelve on the dot. I'll start from the beginning.

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Part one

Fencing in the garden

THE DAY OF MY MOTHER'S LABOUR

The day my mother explained to metheexperience of her labour was the day I decided never to have children. Her description of it was far more detailed than the apology for my birth, even if she did insist that I was the most perfectly formed of all the babies she'd had the chance to see up close. My mother, when she tells a story, tends to go into painstaking detail. As for me, I've always been a listener, and I'm much more impressionable than I might first appear. I can't remember exactly how old I was when I asked her and she answered me. I do remember that I had a good idea of the hows and wherefores: the eggs, the seeds, the loving each other a lot, the not taking the pill —on purpose—, the little kisses, the floweringblooms, the natural lubrication, the broken shell, the baby-fish and the swimming spermicides. Nor do I remember if the story was her response to my curiosity or if my mother took the initiative. And yet, I can pinpoint the exact moment when I came out with the first commandment of my personal declaration of principles: eleven years old and in front of my friends, I solemnly swore that I would never go through labour and, ergo, that I would never be a mother. My friends admired me, and an older girl who had taken it upon herself to poke her nose into our conversation laughed at me, saying that I was still young to know such a thing for sure and that no one can say they'll nottake from

that cup. She spoke in proverbs, the kind who knew how to sew their little patchwork pieces–agirlthat's old before her time is not the same as a precocious girl: the first has ailments and premature inhibitions, she's restrictive and mimetic; the second is mysterious, formidable, observant, full of life. She was a vicious girl who I'm happy to have proved wrong. I've kept my promise and not taken from that cup. There's no time to regret it now and I continue to maintain the same arguments I presentedaged eleven. Now I accumulatemoral, philosophical, historical and sociological reasons.

But still, the main cause for my lack of mammal instinct remains that description, which she didn't deliver in one go, but rather over the entire length of my juvenile development. My mother didn't get up one day and, taking me by the arm, whisper, Come, daughter, I'm going to tell you. She's not one for whispering. So instead the details came trickling out almost imperceptibly. There were none of those revelations or exposed secrets that are so often used in novels and movies. The world doesn't comecrashing down in one go, nor is anyone ready for it from one day to the next.

My mother's story began with morning sickness. A religious woman in those days, she stopped going to mass because the smell of incense and the texture of the host made her feel nauseous. I like to think that I was the first cause of my mother's agnosticism. The truth is that my mother didn't go much further into the symptoms of her morning sickness. She focused on three-thirty in the afternoon one rainy Thursday in autumn; three-thirty in the afternoon –that's what the hands on the clock tell us– on the 14th of November 1967, in Madrid. My mother explained to me the meaning of the expressions "not dilated"

and "push"; the effects of the intravenous fluids in an induced labour; the disproportionbetween a foetus' head and the vaginal orifice; the hallucinations brought on byan anaestheticsubstance called Pentotal–my mother had a crude, tacky fantasy: she is running through a green pasture and my father follows her, like in some kind of detergent advert; it's a shame her experience of psychotropicshad so little to offer–; she also describes the peculiarities of an instrument called a vacuum extractor –my skull still carries an impressive dent on the right hand side–, the expulsion of the placenta and, above all, she describes the image of the blood red sheets, which were the sign that my mother was dying. Apart from the effect that this maternal story had on me growing up – I should emphasise that all of us convert the *input* of our formation as we please, and perhaps I took advantage of my mother's edifying generosity to justify my own lack of instinct– it was logical that she told me these things: I've never been on the brink of death but, if I travel abroad, if my dog falls ill or if I'm left, I feel an overwhelming urge to make a narrative out of that experience, which isn't the same as telling it.

It must have been a spine-chilling scene: one of my great aunts, aunt Pili, my godmother, entered in the ward room where my mother was resting after all her exertions and discovered that she was bleeding. She wouldn't wake up. She was dying like someone who was asleep. Withoutnoticing. My hair stands on end every time my mother tells me how my aunt helped to wrench her from death's sweet grasp. As a child, I couldn't conceive of someone dying like that, withoutnoticing. I was struck by the abruptness of death. Thissense of wonder

and my lack of awareness of the solemnity of the momentistoday more akin to a hope: if only everyone could die in that way, without noticing.

My mother didn't have any more children because no doctor could assure her she wouldn't end up in a permanent state of sleep after a second labour. The problem was related to something called a "globular uteral mass". It was a shame: she would have had time to form a big family because she was young when she gave birth. Now sometimes she grumblesbecause I haven't provided her with any grandchildren. Her grandchildren would have adored her and I would have been terribly jealous, not because my mother would have diminished my children's love from me, but because my children might have diminished some of my love for my mother; my mother, who I love for how she is –hot and cold, strong and weak, abrupt and delicate, self-absorbed and lavish– and for the manner she chose to reveal herself to me, with these stories she told so well; for the effort of the telling; for the emotion; for the generosity. My mother would have taught my children how to talk, telling them stories that had nothing to do with fairies, but withlife, in all its nitty-gritty detail. My mother could not care less about make-believe things. Her stories, her education in a college run by nuns, the names of the teachers, her sewing exercise books, her summer holidays in the town of Castilla, her games, her sisters, her parents, her courtship, her husband, -she never says "my husband", just "Ramón"; nor does she use "daddy"–, her wedding, her work, her labour, her patients, her departure from Madrid, her leaving the profession, her undivideddevotion of herself to me and my father, may well have been the catalyst for my linguistic precociousness: according to her, I started speakingat eight months, although I'll never know if that's really

true or rather forms part of the narrative strategies of my progenitor who is prone to exaggeration, even if she always tells the truth.

My mother's exaggeration is proportional to her delight for the story,which, even if it's realistic, has toinclude a smattering of the extraordinary to arouseinterest; she boasts an above-averagegift for the art ofstorytelling. Quite often she'll stop right in the middle of one of her daily explanations, opening her eyes and saying:

—But just at that moment…

That momenttakes you by surprise, your heart does a little flip and you knowthat whatever'scoming is going tohorrify you. It's by virtue ofthis same narrative sensibility that her college and university friends were all women,dressed as night nurses, wearing push-up bras and still using suspender belts; women who my mother could transform into mythical characters with a single, carefully chosen feature: Margarita's sea-green eyes; Maribel's disproportionatestature; Elena's gall; the adulterous story of Gloria with her married professor; and Maru'saddiction to Bisontes and her yellow, nicotine-stained fingers. Later, Marisa came on the scene, and she played the lead role in an episode that revealed my mother's penchant for eschatology, although she denies having one. Marisa's headstrong character can be summed up in a scene in which she cleans the bottom of a demented nun, scrubbing and tugging on a slimy globulethat won't go away. She pulls on the globule, twists it, while the nun emits a continuous but resigned groan. Marisa is not one forleaving a job half done, and she takes pains toleave the old woman's arse pristine. Tears well up in the eyes of the nun, who after this display of martyrdom, surely earned her place

in heaven above even Saint Agatha of Sicily, that virgin who had her tits cut off by the Romans. Marisa reproaches the nun:

—Mother, Mother, not one for personal hygiene, let's say. Don't complain to me, Mother, don't complain to me.

In the end, alarmed by the relentless cry of the nun, somebody –perhaps my mother?–comesover and alerts Marisa to the fact that the excrement –caruncle, callus, wart, tumour, *cococha*– thatwon't go away is,in fact,a haemorrhoid. These kinds of things tickle my mother, because deep down she has a sense of humour straight out of a doctors' mess. And so it was my mother, a firm advocate of truth and verisimilitude in fiction, the ongoing process of constructingher oral memories, and her realist stories that likelymotivatedmy not having children—those children that I don't miss, and she does—, but these stories also meant that, thanks to my mother, I learnt how to narrate.

Storiesof labours other than my mother'salso helped foment my resistance to being immortalized in the flesh of my flesh. People have given too much importance to childhood. Childhood, and everything that happens to us in it, is a goodpretext for writing poems about pined after experiences, where the corridors are too long, the gardens hide mysteries, and the only smack in the face we ever got in our entire lives magnifiesina disturbing *mise en abyme*, which mean our faces still feel the sting.Childhood, thatoverrated place, eats up our present with its revelations and obscenities, with its greedy appetite fortaking over images and words, with its authoritarianism and its weakness. It's inevitable: many of our first-times belong to childhood. What's more, people tend to perceivechildhood

as the longest period of their lives: the years went by so slowlythat we got stuck there, galley slaves, resentful Lilliputians, who are revered even today whenwe catch sight of our own hand holding a book -our hand with its blue beauty of mature veins andage spots. But the Lilliputian, the galley slavedoesn't recognise it because it doesn't have the hangnails, the bitten down fingers, the remains of dried glue and pen.

So my mother was the first person to make me aware of these things, but she wasn't the only one: Gloria, too, showed me, a mature first-time mum who ripped from her vagina to her anus; Elena, to whom they returned her first child dead in a shoe box and for whom, with her subsequent pregnancies, giving birth was something like taking ashit; Alicia and the useless midwife who didn't fit the I.V. properly in the veinin her hand; Nathalie, whose blood vessels burst all over her face from the strain; Begoña, who was subjected to a caesarean section after five hours of labour pains as she dilated… It's their fault that the idea of forming a family, of stopping being a daughter to become a mother, didn't feature in my plans. Some blame must fallon me, too, since I listened to their stories with satisfaction and extreme morbid curiosity, and I wanted every last detailand later I narrated it all to third parties.