

My Stomach Ache

An afterword by Pedro Gómez-Egaña

A grandfather is alive at the same time as his daughter, her husband and their son. I am the son.

Before I fall asleep I lay down on my bed, look up to the ceiling, and listen across the wall that stands next to my bed; the wall that stands between my room and grandpa's.

Grandpa spends his evenings in his room, drinking and loudly criticising everyone to himself. Maybe he knows that I can hear him. If I wasn't here, on this side of the wall, would he still speak up in rage?

I imagine him as a young man living in a time without me, a man outside my time. I imagine his cells living and dying every five weeks, I imagine his blood moving in intervals, it disgusts me. I realise that we are family and that whatever he is made out of must also be inside of me. I can hear him moving around, and I hate thinking that I am there with him too.

I never want to be a grandson, and I never want to be a father. I hate being a son, I only want to be a brother.

My mother says that my brother died when he was still inside of her, when he was more her than him, before he was himself, so there's no point in calling him "He". Let's call him James. When I was younger my mum would talk about James, but she would laugh and call him "my stomach ache". I never found that funny.

When I'm mad at my mother, and it happens often, I try to separate James from her. This is how I do it: I lie on my bed, look up at the ceiling, and summon the heat between my vocal cords. That heat is the voice before the sound, a brew of damp air that spreads like octopus ink. Octopus ink in warm, salty Caribbean waters, soggy clouds of poison. When my throat begins to feel too small for the emulsion, I can see

James appear on the ceiling. He is soft and thin, he has a lightness that contrasts the murk in my throat. We exchange temperatures and that's how we talk.

It's morning. Father is always the first one to wake up. He listens to the radio and shuffles things around. He makes sounds that don't correspond with the objects we have in the kitchen, sounds of a snake slithering in a pool of earth and fresh intestines, for instance. He calls it breakfast. As soon as Mother wakes up she walks around ignoring him. She wants him to notice her disregard because it's satisfying and the satisfaction wakes her up. For Mother and Father mornings are about undoing the absurd drunken steps that led them to a life together. The drunken steps that led us to share this house.

I hate this place. I want to leave this house and never return, and I want James to come with me. Maybe one day the two of us will go. Maybe soon, maybe today.

I'm ready, says James from the ceiling.

I'm surprised by his sudden conviction. OK, I say and I stay there paralysed, lying on the bed waiting for something to happen.

Grandpa closes his door and the wall between us shivers. The sun tickles the side of the curtain and a line of dust lifts beside my bed. It moves my imagination and serves as encouraging evidence of cosmic truths, of fate. I reach out with my hand and feel it with my fingers. The particles get excited. I think I'm ready.

We wait there, James and I, facing each other in silence. For minutes, maybe hours as the planets and stars settle back on the floor. I feel disappointed because we haven't gone anywhere.

James stares down at me patiently.

Do you want to play a game instead? he asks.

Yes, I say. why not.

OK. *Look up at the ceiling and try to imagine your mother's eyes. Imagine their surface and their shape. Do you see them?*

Yes.

Good. Now imagine your father's eyes. Imagine their surface and their shape. Do you see them?

Yes.

Good. Now bring them together slowly.

Watch them move into alignment, gradually like an eclipse. Watch the lenses overlap and the tiny inner fibres dissolve into each other.

Do you see them?

Yes.

At the end of this process you will see a colour.

Do you see it?

Yes.

What name would you give that colour?