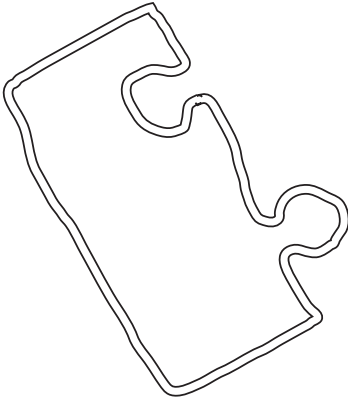


PIECES FOR AN
INFINITE
CONVERSATION



Text written by: Alba Solà García

We are on the terrace of my apartment, and we have just finished eating: the plates and cutlery are piled up on the table and will remain there all afternoon. Also the blocks in front of the house, and those of Barcelona in the distance: piles and layers of bodies and places that will be the landscape of the conversation we will have today, which is nothing but the continuation of the one we started the day we met. Simone joins us this afternoon, sitting in one of the armchairs I took with me from my grandmother's house. She is uncomfortable, and often complains: she interrupts us, and we like it when she does. The world must keep interrupting us, always.

I met Irene talking: folding and cutting leaves; gluing and painting pieces of paper. I had gone for the first time to the fanzine meeting that was held in one of our favorite places, the cooperative bookstore La Caníbal. There began a long conversation that has not stopped, and that started the same as it does now: with me fascinated by the world that Irene unfolds with her ideas and images, drawn with many types of materials that are also piled up in her hybrid, mutant works: words, fabrics and tapestries, collages, ceramics, drawing, ink, photography and prints.

Look, just a month or so ago I was interviewed on the radio and the interviewer asked me at one point: If you had to say what is your material as an artist, what material would you say? And I don't know where it came from; I mean, I know where it came from, from all the

years I've been thinking about a lot of things, but it came to me all of a sudden and I said: Conversations. And that connects with the stories. On the one hand, it's having those difficult conversations, and that almost nobody wants to have: I feel that I have always been that person, even in my family; the one who brought up topics that bothered. I've always felt like I've been in that place, and it hasn't been until recently that I feel like it's okay, that I'm comfortable. But until a few years ago it was also uncomfortable for me, because I thought: Why can't you relate from another place?

The world that Irene unfolds is made of multiple forms that convoke new stories. These stories do not fight among themselves to establish a predominant place of enunciation, not even hierarchies: like rivers when they meet, they interrupt each other for a while to continue happening at the same time, they resonate and reverberate among themselves in a becoming-with that intensifies and triggers their meanings. Irene's world belongs to the universe of "And": Irene does not like adversatives. There is never just one thing happening, she tells me, but always many things happening at the same time. Everything is multiple possibilities and multiple simultaneous occurrences.

03

I am concerned about the stories: what we tell, what is not told, what is hidden on purpose, what is made invisible.... I want to have conversations that are difficult, like talking about your body deteriorating, getting sick, feeling pain and that's your reality. The multiplicity comes from here.

Irene has been creating and exhibiting for a long time or, as she calls it, making projects: her art does not start and end in the exhibition's space and time. Her projects have been going on for a long time before: in the books she reads and the questions she asks herself; in the conversations she has with her friends, relatives and acquaintances; and they are still going on afterwards. What she is interested in is, above all, what happens to us with them: how her projects pass through us, what words resonate with us. What conversations we want to continue having.

In Irene's art there are several knots that intertwine: one of them, central to this exhibition, is the body that is ill.

There is a turning point from where I am now and what this exhibition is, which is during the confinement: to start becoming ill without knowing I was becoming ill or not even being aware of an illness, and at that moment, to be reading some specific texts and listening to some specific music, which begin to reproduce ideas from other places: I read some parts of Donna Haraway's *Staying With the Trouble*, and I read essays on writing and storytelling by Ursula K. Le Guin. Le Guin. And there, within all the collective imaginary that was going on in pandemic, I started to ask myself: How are we going to make these stories? Which stories are missing? Which ones are being told? Which ones are intentionally hidden? Which stories are only told in one way? For example, they are only told if one knows how to write well, knows how to speak well; what the academy says it means well; that also has a very important class nuance... And I began to think about all these things, which then came together. And there I wrote five poems, which are the poems of *Mutation*, which later, over the next two years, when I became more aware of my illness, grew to nine. And it was a before and after because it was the conscious beginning from the unconscious of my illness: I think I have had this illness since adolescence and it has not presented itself until now; it has been presenting itself in different episodes and until now there has not been a diagnosis.

04

i looked at myself in the mirror and it said

you are weird

and i felt

at ease

*one morning at the end
of 2019 ¹*

The title of this exhibition is *A Suffering BODY in A Wounded WORLD*. And this thought, and almost this phrase, comes from a session I did as a result of going into the being ill and to start looking for other places from which to create my own narrative in relation to it. Then I ran into La Alkimila, who is this person who gives somatic therapy workshops and also herbalism: and at a given moment

¹Prelude

when I was feeling very bad and I was doing a session with her, she told me: “How can you not feel sick, if the world is wounded?” There is a detachment from what surrounds us, and it doesn’t do us any good. I now have flare ups when the heat is very high: my body varies its symptomatology with the weather. And this is nothing new: people who have rheumatism know that when the rains come it hurts more. All our symptomatologies are also related to the planet’s symptomatologies, because we are not disconnected.

String figures are like stories; they propose and enact patterns for participants to inhabit, somehow, on a vulnerable and wounded earth.

Playing games of string figures is about giving and receiving patterns, dropping threads and failing but sometimes finding something that works, something consequential and maybe even beautiful, that wasn’t there before, of relaying connections that matter, of telling stories in hand upon hand, digit upon digit, attachment site upon attachment site, to craft conditions for finite flourishing on terra, on earth.²

05

The ill body is placed at the center: it is the body that Irene inhabits and from which she thinks. And also from which she plays and invites us to play: to continue thinking about the stories we are told about our bodies; how they are and how they have to behave, what spaces they should occupy; what happens to them and why what happens to them does happen to them. In a world sick of explanations, of adversatives and ideas that repeat the world without producing thought, Irene’s body is a resounding matter that undoes the norm. For her, the important thing is to question everything and question ourselves all the time, to put everything and ourselves in uncomfortable places. People just repeat phrases, she tells me. And this repetition of the norm is sustained by a culture of fear.

They make us afraid of everything. When you are diagnosed with an illness, the first feeling you have is fear. And I live in fear. So do we all. The norm exists and can be applied because there is fear: you don’t want to be different, you don’t want to get out of the norm. The norm makes us homogeneous under fear. But normality is not what happens most often, which is what we have been told. What happens most often is not the homogeneous, it is the diverse. It is the different.

²Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble* (2016), 10.

No two people are the same, no two twins are identical. Therefore, that normality that makes one equal towards a homogeneity is absurd. For me, normality is that each one of us is each one of us. And this is related to the fact that we are told certain stories and not others; that these stories are restrictive and direct us to certain places, and this is where I connect with Haraway and Ursula K. Le Guin, and not only with them: I connect with what I talk about with all my friends, day in day out. Sometimes I read a book and I think: this is what I was talking about the other day, and maybe I didn't have this language yet.

It's like an infinite conversation, which never ends.

We have to destroy normality by telling stories, among all of us.

Go on, say I, wandering off towards the wild oats, with Oo Oo in the sling and little Oom carrying the basket. You just go on telling how the mammoth fell on Boob and how Cain fell on Abel and how the bomb fell on Nagasaki and how the burning jelly fell on the villagers and how the missiles will fall on the Evil Empire, and all the other steps in the Ascent of Man.³

And what about the norm and the ill body, I ask her. Simone interrupts us: she meows and scratches frantically. The cone collar she is wearing doesn't let her reach the wounds, and this exasperates her. Irene caresses her, and says: We are here talking about care and bodies, and here we are with Simone, who also has a body that needs care...

06

Normality says that illness can only happen in one way. That sick life can only be one thing. Normality requires no sick bodies: and this becomes medical violence and care that is not care, that is ableism. And it is even more violent with suffering and illnesses that are invisibles, like mine. Now I have been ill for four years in total, diagnosed for a year and a half, and I know how to navigate certain spaces and certain things, and still I find myself in situations of violence. But, at the beginning I didn't even know what was happening to me.

*/sculpted organ
by the destruction*

³Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction"

which reconfigures/

cavernous

/harsh

multiple structure

repetitive/

a place for echo

reminiscence

vague memory

faint survival⁴

07

So normality tells you that if you have a headache, what do you do? You take a pill. You don't sit down with that headache and say: maybe I'm going to give myself half an hour to rest, maybe that's what I need. Medication is a very delicate topic because it is also very normative: and I do not advocate suffering for the sake of suffering; it is not about that. A normality that is associated with any illness is to rest in bed, and that this will bring you wellbeing. Bed rest with this illness hurts: you are not resting. The pain of this illness is musculoskeletal: all the muscles and all the bones hurt, therefore the whole body hurts. There is also radial pain, that is, where there is no muscle or bone, well, it is the same, you get pain from the muscle and the bone, then absolutely everything hurts to unsettling levels: you cannot sleep; the slight touch of the bed sheets hurts, getting on one side hurts that side, you turn to the other side and the other side hurts, and you have to alternate.... It is painful, only that you are at rest; in the sense that you are not doing physical activity and you are not standing.

So, it's about sometimes you don't have a choice, or sometimes the medication that they tell you to take or that you have to end up taking doesn't work as well or it causes you other problems. A lot of other things can happen, and what normality tells you is that it can only happen one way. Not that it can, but that it only *has to* happen one way. So at the beginning, when I got ill, the care I got from everybody

⁴Second mutation

is what we all do, because we are educated like this: “But, have you done this, have you done that, have you done the other,” and in those situations I felt like unsettled and I got frustrated and mad, and at the same time I asked myself from where we care for others and why we care like that, and why we assume that the other person is not doing everything they can. We don’t see that, for example, giving advice can be of great violence. There are people who have started giving me advice without even asking me what’s wrong with me, and what my illness is. Because nobody really knows what it is. To begin with, doctors don’t fully know what it is.

*i've decided
to turn myself arround
and
inside out
flip
the body
over
the bones now
covering the surface
exoskeleton
turn (me)
openly
into a monster
blind with
the shine
of ivory
all who are
only capable
of seeing
with two eyes⁵*

08

We have an unhealthy way to understand and relate ourselves with illness. If you have an ill body, why can't you stop and take care of it? Because we live in a capitalist world, then all the care is done from there: from the objective that the body should return to normal life, which is the productive life. And, in the end, everything comes down to wanting to solve a problem so that it does not become a waste of our time. And my story is that I am going to take care of

⁵Seventh Mutation

this problem. *I am taking care of it.* Not all of us have to take care of everything, not all of us can take care of everything, but (and I say this making parallels with something Haraway says) I say: not all of us have to take care of everything, but all of us do have to take care of something. Because Haraway says: “Not everything is connected to everything, but everything is connected to something.” We are connected to something and everything becomes interconnected in one way or another, and this is how to take care of things.

Inhabiting her body, and taking care of it. Of a pain that is not only hers: because in the body resonate the bodies of others, of those who came before us. Irene’s work on her body does not only deal with the present, but opens up to other times. To her ancestors, and to her memory. Because this pain cannot be hers alone.

09

I was sitting in the attic of the apartment where we lived. It was getting dark, very little light was coming in, and I was in pain and everything was confusing. And I remember having this thought: this is not only mine; it can’t be only mine. It’s too much pain to be mine alone. And then the link with everything more ancestral has been happening like that, in moments of flare ups of pain, having dreams and things like that.

Like that day: I had been having a flare up for a very long time, I was in bed, and there you go crazy with so much pain. I still had no diagnosis, so I had no medication. Then I had a dream, which I call a dream-memory, because it is part of the memory of when I lived with my grandmother for a while: she wore a girdle, and she gave me rubs of rosemary alcohol, and I also gave her rubs and helped her to put talcum powder and put on the girdle, because it rubbed her in some places. Then, I dreamt that my grandmother came and told me: “Give me rubs of rosemary alcohol!” And that was the moment when I connected the disease with my genealogy, with my family. I started to think: who else has had this illness, what is this illness that I still did not have a name for. And then is when I started researching. My grandmother was never diagnosed with fibromyalgia, but there is another person in the family, her niece, who has it...

By researching I have found a seed, the genetic seed, if there is a genetic aspect in this illness, which is not determined either. And from that seed other seeds began to emerge, and other stories: the whole issue of transgenerational trauma, the loss of childhood, the violence within the family, and also the unknown history of (as it happens to many of us here in this country) what happened during the war and after the war... And there are many other things begin to emerge that give much sense to this illness, and give much sense to that first phrase that comes to me in my head I do not know from where: this pain is not only mine.

And to understand that our bodies are an accumulation of all these stories, of all its parts. And that pain, which is one of the forms that any type of illness can take, also comes from a story. Because illnesses are not spontaneous generations, whatever the origin. Let's say you've been living near a factory and swallowing the smoke all your life, and you develop lung cancer. So, there is a story: there is a scientific reality and at the same time there is a story of why, who are you, who was your family, why did you live there, how could you be near that factory swallowing all that shit, why other people never had that.... So there are also many stories, it is not a unique story of having a genetic mutation. The stories are not unique in any illness. Everything comes together in our bodies, because our bodies are not independent of anything.

10

The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present. Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places.⁶

In fact, I didn't make artworks about the illness until much later: what came first were the fanzines. At a certain point we started to make fanzines with Tatiana and Jesús at La Caníbal, and I couldn't come up with any, until one day when I was in a lot of pain I came up with the first fanzine, which is the first in the *Dolor* (pain) series. And then all the others came, and I started to connect with some things, like anti-capacitism. And I discovered many other things, and the fanzines of the *Muta* series arrived, which are the fanzines I made as a result

⁶Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble* (2016), 19.

of the symptoms and medical tests I have. Each one is like a little science fiction story: the way I see them is that they are all part of a whole story, but they are its multiple possibilities, the multiple things that happen at the same time.

Science fiction properly conceived, like all serious fiction, however funny, is a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on, what people actually do and feel, how people relate to everything else in this vast sack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story. In it, as in all fiction, there is room enough to keep even Man where he belongs, in his place in the scheme of things.⁷

Everything in the *Muta* fanzines comes from a space-time where some entities, some beings are telling stories; we don't know what they are because I haven't figured that part yet; but there is this place that has many times and where there are many entities that are telling stories. And these are some of the stories they are telling of what has happened to the many bodies that have been related to this space-time.

11

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.⁸

The fanzine *Saberse Ballena* (to know oneself a whale) talks about the whole process of illness, and about how I relate to the character of the whale that emerges in the poem of the *Fourth Mutation*, which is really about dying, about death. I think a lot about dying, about what death really is: it's becoming part of the compost, as Haraway says, and having your matter transformed into another kind of matter. In that sense it relates a lot to her world view, such as the jellyfish: the idea that a body is eternal, but not in the same form all the time. In the *Fourth Mutation*, I imagine my body decomposing into the water, and when the whales eat the plankton I become part of their flesh, because I am in that plankton. And so, although my life in the form

⁷Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction"

⁸Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble* (2016), 12.

I know it is over, my matter is not over. It continues, in many other matters.

*this body i inhabited
has decomposed
now it is part of the salt the plankton*

and of the void

*within me
resonates
the song of the
cetaceans
calling their young
and their partners*

*tiny
microscopic
i get into their stomachs
slipping through their baleen
sailing across their immense
jaws*

*i take now
a new form⁹*

12

In this exhibition there are two earlier works: the first is *Handroot*, which is accompanied by three earlier texts called *Three Superpowers: Invisibility, Flight and Mutation*. *Handroot* belongs to *Seeds For Resistance* (2019), a project in which Irene tried to accumulate tools, images and ideas inside a carrier bag, like Ursula K. Le Guin, which were seeds to imagine other present, past and future times and narratives. The carrier bag was for her daughter Maia, to continue thinking and conversing with her.

Maia had entered my studio many times, but then her questions came in and I couldn't resist anymore: I was resisting, because I had to be the cool artist who doesn't do things with her children. Then Maia enters the studio, her conversations enter the studio, and her

⁹Fourth mutation.

questions become questions for me too, to investigate things.

Mama, if you were a super heroine, what would be the symbol that would be on your costume?

A handroot.

I imagined myself nomadic, moving from one place to another, crossing over the planet's crust through forests and bodies of water. And when you ask me for a story, one of those you like us so much tell you day or night, I would kneel, I would put my fingers inside the wet ground and I would mutate so that they would grow roots. Inside the earth, these roots would be able to absorb the sound of the voices of they who stepped on it before us, so to collect their (hi)stories and keep on telling them.¹⁰

13

The second earlier work is a self-portrait, *The Leftovers of the Aftermath*. In this work, which is a tapestry, I put the remains of all the fabrics and threads that I have been using throughout the exhibition *Seeds for Resistance*. And I ask myself: What happens to the mother's body when she has already gestated, given birth and raised her child? And the answer, which I found a few months ago, is: the body becomes ill, in my case.

The other texts in the exhibition are *Nine Mutations* and *A Fracture*, and all of them are accompanied by a new work I have made for this exhibition. The *Nine Mutations* addresses the moment of uncertainty, when there is not even an awareness of illness but there is an awareness that something is happening into that body. That is why they are called poems of mutation.

*(ir)reversible mutation
to answer
those who
ask
what are you?
an
i am for ever more

mutant¹¹*

¹⁰Three Superpowers: Mutation.

¹¹Seventh Mutation

And all this, later on, ends up having a connection with the ancestors. All we find in our reality is what has existed, constantly transforming. Once we were driving on the road to Manresa; I was there, in the car with Aurelio, and Maia in the back listening to music, and I was having a flare up and I was in a lot of pain. And I started to look at the landscape and I started to think: How many bodies there are under this earth. And we're not just talking about human bodies: how many bodies, underneath us, right now? Everything we see from here, this wonderful view: underneath, there are layers and layers of bodies and stories and lives that have passed.

In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations. Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.¹²

14

For me, to sit with the illness is this: it is to sit with my present that comes from the past, that goes towards the future. And it is to sit with this and to stay with the problem, to learn to be truly present, to be able to then to be these critters: I see my own mutations as these creatures, as these critters that are my body. Each of the mutations that are happening in my body, in one way or another: a transformation, a disappearance. With pain, with suffering: because this is part of all this, and without it it would not happen in this way; it would happen in another way. It can happen in many ways, but it has happened to me in this way: and I explore this way.

And from here I can generate new narratives: I can create stories.

There is time enough to gather plenty of wild oats and sow them too, and sing to little Oom, and listen to Ool's joke, and watch newts, and still the story isn't over. Still there are seeds to be gathered, and room in the bag of stars.¹³

¹² Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble* (2016), 1.

¹³ Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction"

un **CUERPO**
doliente
en un **MUNDO**
herido

Alba Solà García (Barcelona, 1986) investiga y escribe. Se doctoró en Filadelfia con una tesis donde analiza nuestro pasado reciente a partir de estudios culturales, urbanos y de memoria. Sigue publicando artículos académicos, pero está concentrándose en explorar el mismo tema con colaboraciones más contagiosas y desde formatos menos convencionales, como la ficción y el fanzine, y está convirtiendo su tesis en un ensayo que se publicará pronto bajo el título de Breve historia del capitalismo español (y de mi abuela).

15



Simone (Terres de l'Ebre, 2013) nació un día de julio, y la metieron junto a sus hermanxs en una caja que fue encontrada y trasladada a Barcelona. Allí, en una cama y rodeada de humanxs, eligió a la suya metiéndose en su mochila. Se le (im)puso un nombre bastante pedante al que ella responde cuando decide sentirse interpelada. Sufre una alergia epidérmica aguda crónica que la ciencia antropocéntrica trata con una medicación inmunosupresora en forma de pastillas, que ella detesta ingerir. Disfruta subiéndose a los árboles cuando sale del barrio, y odia profundamente la costumbre humana de silbar.

///Irene Pérez (también conocida como irene_pe) recorre su camino cerca de Barcelona y lo hizo antes en Chicago///ella/elle es una/e exploradora/e de mundos interiores y exteriores a través del uso de materiales y técnicas textiles, dibujo, fotografía, sonido, narración y poesía mediante el pensamiento tentacular///ella/elle ha navegado a través del arte los espacios sobre migración, identidad cultural y de género, maternidad, lenguaje(s), salud mental, fragilidad corporal, dolor, feminismo(s) y ecología///ella/elle te invita a recorrer sus descubrimientos en este espacio///



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