

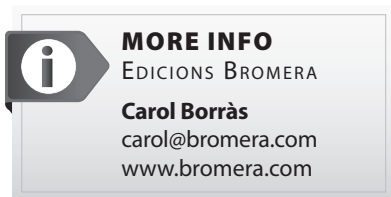


Gemma Pasqual i Escrivà

BARÇA
OU
BARZAKH!
A LIFE-OR-DEATH JOURNEY

Translated by Andrew McDougall

bromera



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Barça ou Barzakh!

Is an expression often used in Senegal to refer to the clandestine emigrants who leave the Senegalese coast on a raft and head for the Canary Islands.

Barzakh is a Wolof word of Arabic origin, which more or less means 'beyond death'. The meaning of the phrase could be understood as: 'Barcelona or death'.

In the suburbs of Dakar, barefoot Senegalese children run around after a football, shouting *Barça ou barzakh!*

1. Matukaay bu jëkk bi

*Doomi aadama yépp danuy juddu, yam ci tawfeex
ci sag ak sañ-sañ.*

*Nekk na it ku xam dëgg te ànd na ak xelam,
te war naa jëflante ak nawleen, te teg ko ci wàllu
mbokk.*

Article 1

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

CI TAALIF

*Jële ko ci ab dun ni baat,
ci diggante xool ak téere,
and ak degg ak deglu
taaru gelaw li
taax dal ba mbind mooy nooyi,
mooy xam, mooy sëy
te aada def nu deff nit,
ma wax la ko tàggale sàggo:
bëgge la bu dul yaw
dara du daw yaram
dara du ne ci Deggë
Li nut oowe dunde.*

*Ak làkki xol
di ñupp ni geej
mbam bu laan ak dun yi,
di ji ak baati taalif ngir mu
mënni moom sa boop ak ubbe ku
jaar bu selle bu aduna
Njariñ ak deggu.*

*Ëpp fa juddoo
Bokk ci gox bi nu sope
njàngaat teeri yi di gërëm
Tax li nu aam li nu joxe
di wuttel been jant
taalif bu mag fenn fu aamatul
Reew bu dul dund.*

PONÇ PONS

Translated by Abdou Màwa Njaay Tekki ko

TO POETRY

From an island of words,
among olive trees and books,
while I feel, listening
to the beauty of the wind,
that writing is breathing,
understanding, making love
and art humanises us,
I'll tell you passionately:
I love you and without you
nothing would have emotion
nor would it be so true
this thing they call living.

With languages of the heart
and ink like the generous
sea of the islands,
we sow verses to make
sense and truth
flourish freely and openly
in the sacred body of the world.

More than where we were born
we are from the place we love
and grateful readers
who have what we give
we make multiples from one
great poem where there is
no homeland except life.

PONÇ PONS

Translated by Andrew McDougall

Ci ap degglu ngay yanga
Only those who listen learn

Charles Darwin put it forward more than 150 years ago and no palaeontologist since has argued the fact that we were born in Africa, that Africa is the cradle of humanity, our starting point. My own, specifically, was the city of Dakar, the same place from whence the Dutch and British sent 12 million slaves to America until little over a century ago.

It is the proud capital of Senegal, the country of *Teranga*, which in my native Wolof language means ‘hospitality’. The city that inspired Yousou N’Dour and the train station that captivated Kapuściński. The city that gave its name to the most famous rally in the world. It is a place of contrasts. In the centre of Dakar you won’t find any starting grids or black-and-white chequered flags announcing the finish line. There are no off-road vehicles covered in stickers, nor racing bikes or trucks at full speed. The buildings are a reminder of the French empire: there are skyscrapers, colonial

houses, tree-lined streets with cafes and shops that appear inspired by the former metropole.

The outskirts transport us to the poverty of forgotten Africa. Dakar is a pressure cooker. Full of contamination, smog and noise, it is a permanent traffic jam; two hours is an optimistic estimate of how long it takes to cross the city. Black and yellow taxis and cars older than their drivers – our life expectancy is 55 – combine in an unbearable melody of klaxons, with the bosses being the Ndiaga Ndiaye, the small white Mercedes buses, even older, if possible, than the taxis, and which serve as public transport for all the residents of the neighbourhoods on the outskirts. The Car Rapide is without doubt the most picturesque and emblematic transport in the city; painted blue and yellow and with the ticket inspector hanging from the back, surrounded by youngsters, the bus moves slowly and is always full. *Alhamdulillah!* Praise be to Allah, may none of the youngsters hanging on fall off and have an accident.

Street sellers, child beggars, a woman on every corner with a baby on her lap or tied to their sister's back, all ask for spare change to survive. Men and women of incredible beauty wear multicoloured boubous. Thousands of young people meander

these chaotic streets without any apparent purpose, wearing faded t-shirts with discoloured badges of football teams from all over Europe: Schalke, Ajax, Barcelona, Benfica. Watching games from the major European leagues on television has become a more popular form of entertainment than cinema. Few have televisions in their own houses, so in the city's ghettos small dark rooms have been built, like cinemas, inside wooden cabins, with an aerial and a television. They advertise the upcoming big games in European leagues or the Champions League with handmade posters and charge entry.

The official statistics say that two million people live in Dakar. But in the coastal section that runs eastwards from the capital to the city of Rufisque alone, there are five million. A succession of suburbs that the authorities consider dangerous for *toubabs*, which is what we call white people.

I was born in one of these downtrodden agglomerations, where the streets have no name and the houses no numbers, in Hann-Pêcheurs, the neighbourhood where a mass of barefoot kids play amongst the goats in a labyrinth of sandy alleyways that in the rainy season become muddy rivers flooding the houses.

My favourite game is *seiva*: one of the players is a camel and gets down on all fours, another, the camel driver, guides them and has to touch them at all times. When the camel driver shouts *seiva*, all the other players have to reply with the same word and run towards the camel to try to touch it. If I haven't told you already, my name is Amadou and I'm sixteen years old, so it's been a long time since I played *seiva*, although it was very fun.

In my neighbourhood, scabies leaps freely from animals' backs to people's heads. It isn't uncommon to find children and adults, victims of polio, dragging their useless legs. On both sides of the alleyways, narrow doors open on to small courtyards, surrounded by rooms with fibre-cement rooves. Each of these houses can be home to up to fifty members of the same family.

In mine there are forty of us living in eight rooms, cells arranged around a narrow courtyard, where the only tap can be found and from which flows the greatest treasure in my land: water. Every room is the home of a family in the clan, the parents' bed takes up almost all the space, while the children sleep on the floor. At the back of the courtyard, there is a small dark room with a stove, the kitchen, the favourite place for flies, and which

spreads a stench of fried fish all over the house, filling the neighbourhood and intensifying with every kitchen it passes. It only disappears when grandma makes *bissap*, my favourite drink – made with the large beautiful, trumpet-shaped petals of the hibiscus flower – and then the whole house has a musky scent that invades all your senses.

I'm an orphan, I have two brothers and four sisters. My parents are both dead; they didn't die alone, I have the honour of being with my mother in her final moments of life. I don't remember it, but my grandma says the last thing she did was smile when she saw I was a boy.

My sister Fatou was with my father when he died. She hasn't forgotten it, the mirror reminds her every day when she sees the big scar across her face. She and my dad were excited spectators at the Dakar Rally, a demanding race that has been enthralling drivers, fans, sponsors and the media alike, exploring roads and pushing the body to the limit, for more than thirty years, since 1977 when the French motorcyclist Thierry Sabine got lost in the desert while competing in the Abidjan-Nice Rally before being miraculously rescued. In his excitement, he felt that more people should experience this and he created a route that began in

Europe. The race would take in Algiers, then pass through Agadez and end in Dakar. The founder came up with a slogan for his creation: *A challenge for those who go. A dream for those who stay behind.*

The dream faded and brought fatality to my family and Sabine himself, as nine years after the first race the Ténéré desert took his life. The helicopter he was flying in crashed into a sand dune. Despite the accident, the competition carried on and some years later, my father was killed and my sister badly injured by the impact from a Range Rover that somersaulted into the spectators. More than fifty deaths since it began is the tragic cost of the toughest rally around.

We live with my grandma Mareime, the queen bee of one of the neighbourhood hives. I couldn't tell you her age for certain, but it is clear that she has far exceeded the life expectancy in my country. Twice widowed, she has twenty grandchildren. Well, depending on which family member is counting. Mareime has the best room in the house, which she shares with my sister Fatou, six square metres with a window that gives on to the street, just above the goats' trough, an extra bed and a wardrobe. At the head of her large bed, there is a shelf with various bottles of oils, some photographs and a radio-cassette player that makes all the grandchildren dance to the rhythm of *mbalakh*. The king of this type of music is Youssou N'Dour and his princes include Alioune Mbaye Nder, Omar Pene, Alioune Kasse or, Fatou's favourite, the charming Thione Ballago Seck.

We love dancing, we start from birth, wrapped up in a scarf on our mothers' backs, she sings while she works, bouncing gently and the children move up and down, following the rhythm. In all the in-

initiation rituals to adult life, boys and girls sing and dance together. When we are adults, dance is also a big part of our lives. The *seourouba* drums sound and we begin to dance. There are three of them: Kutirinding, the smallest, is the newborn baby. Kutiriba is the youngster. Djilandiang, the oldest, is the grandfather. In Mandinka it means ‘the messenger’ and it is the soloist in the *serouruba* group.

Music is very important, it means more than just having a good time. All of life’s important moments are accompanied by songs. Every important decision, every ritual, every spiritual act has its song.

My sister Fatou has a lovely voice, they say she got it from my mum. Fatou is always by my grandma’s side, not parting from her for a minute. She is unmarried and has a slight limp; for her, it is a stigma, she’d like to be a *djongama* woman, a beauty. My grandma, who is very wise, always tells her:

‘*Ci ap degglu ngay yanga*. Only those who listen learn. Allah moulded us and he said said: *I will give you long legs for walking like the flamingos who fish by the riverbanks; I will give you long arms so you can work with a hoe like a monkey uses a stick; I will give you a mouth for eating and a tongue for singing; and*

I will give you eyes so you can see what you eat and ears so you can hear the songs. Allah has been very generous to you, Fatou, and he has given you all these things, a little scar or a slight limp shouldn't spoil your life. Praise be to Allah.'

Ku la mag ëpp lay sagar. Our elders are the ones who know the most. In my country, when an older person speaks to say something important, it is as if a magical enchantment falls over whoever is listening. If you don't listen with all your senses, you will inevitably miss something important.

I dreamed of being a sailor, having my own boat, setting sail every day and earning lots of money by fishing, but it wasn't to be. When I finished school, I began the first year of an apprenticeship to become a soldier. I thought that when my studies were over, with my impressive qualification under my belt, I'd find a good job to help my family. It didn't happen like that. I hadn't finished my course when grandma told he she couldn't keep paying for my studies. I had no choice but to look for work with the soldier. I did a few poorly paid jobs until I realised that I would never get anywhere on that path. So I went back to my old idea of being a sailor. A cousin of Grandma's who was a fisherman agreed to take me on as an assistant on his boat.

There were 24 of us on board. We fished on the night of the new moon, which is when the fish appear. We used a light to attract them. We cast the net and all pulled a cord until we were able to lift our catch on board.

My grandma said that fishermen were helped by the spirit Dju-dju. She loved telling us stories, she would sit in the middle of the courtyard and all the grandchildren gathered round, hanging on her every word.

'Ci ap degglu ngay yanga. Only those who listen learn. Once upon a time, there was a fisherman who lived by a river. He loved his job. One day a very big fish had bitten, but when he pulled on the rod, he was shocked to see that it wasn't a fish but the spirit Dju-dju who, with an axe in his hand, was mocking him. The fisherman complained and asked why he didn't help him with his work, instead of laughing at him. The spirit Dju-dju didn't like the fisherman's attitude at all and challenged him: they would see which of the two of them was stronger by throwing the axe up in the air. The Dju-dju spirit threw it first, very high. The axe splashed into the water and fell to the bottom of the water. When the spirit managed to fetch it, the fisherman proudly claimed he would throw it so

far they'd never get it back. But then they decided they didn't want to lose something so valuable. So, the challenge would be to see which of them could catch more fish. The spirit didn't know how to use the fishing rod, so the fisherman advised him to stay still. As he was nervous, he tied him to a tree, where he didn't manage to catch a single fish. The spirit Dju-dju didn't stop shouting that he wanted to be freed but, eventually, he gave up. He promised the fisherman he would give him plenty of fish. The fisherman, with the secret help of the spirit Dju-dju, in time became a rich and powerful man.'

Sometimes other children from the neighbourhood also came to listen to her stories. My best friend was Mabale. Our houses were almost next door, we had grown up together. His great passion was football. When we were little, disobeying our mothers' orders, the neighbourhood kids went to the beach to play football; we were happy, bare-foot, kicking the bundle of old rags and elastic bands that served as a ball among piles of crumbled bricks, asbestos and bits of broken glass.

From a young age, Mabale realised that he had no future in Dakar. Even though his life was better than mine, he was happy studying at school and

surrounded by his large family with eleven siblings. Despite that, Mabale knew that if he wanted to progress in life, he would have to leave his loved ones behind. If he stayed, with luck, the future held for him a few goats and sheep. Mabale dreamed of making it at a European football club. It was his plan to escape poverty. My grandma had no time for Mabale's obsession with football, she used to say: *if you always give a boy what he wants...in the end he won't know what he really wants!*

In Senegal, almost a million youngsters have a football licence. Thousands attend recognised training centres, all following their heroes, now great stars of the game: Samuel Eto'o, Salif and Seydou Keita, Solomon Kalou, Bakari Koné, Touré Yaya... All of them grew up in Africa and went on to have an international career. Many dream of trying their luck in Europe. Young football prodigies who sacrifice everything to reach those legendary clubs and wonderful salaries. However, though many set off on the adventure, not all follow the right path. Between the ghost academies, fake agents and child transfers, scams are an everyday occurrence. The story is a common one. A talent spotter promises them a brilliant career in Europe only to then leave them to fend for themselves,

without looking after their migration status, as they travel as tourists, with no money to return, no club and, above all, no academic qualifications to forge a path in a foreign country with a different language, culture and social rules to theirs.

‘But I won’t let myself be tricked by those scammers, I have a plan,’ my friend always said with a mysterious air. ‘*Barça ou Barzakh!*’ he always ended with the same cry and a raised fist.

‘*Barça ou Barzakh!*’ I replied automatically, with my first raised too.

Mabale, my cousin Umm and I formed an inseparable trio, and we were all the same age. Umm was very funny and seemed very mature, or at least she did to us; she played football, was very intelligent and knew loads of stories, just like Grandma.



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In Dakar, barefooted children chase a ball shouting *Barça ou barzakh*, an expression used by undocumented emigrants who set sail from the Senegalese coast and which means *Barcelona or death*. Amadou and Mabale have decided to make this motto their own and, along with Umm and Noolamala, leave in a small boat towards paradise: Europe. Not caring about the risks or dangers that await them, the four of them share the same dream: a better life. Mabale wants to play football for Barça, Noolamala wants to start a beauty salon in Benidorm, Umma wants to be a teacher and Amadou is so in love with Noolamala that he'd follow her to the ends of the earth.

Gemma Pasqual (Almoines, 1967) has been honored with the Samaruc, Barcanova, and Mallorca awards, among others. With *Barça ou barzakh!* she was a finalist for the 15th Premi Bancaixa de Narrativa Juvenil.

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