

WHEN I'M OLDER, I WANT TO BE A HOUSE

Aina Fullana Llull





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//l'eclèctica//

If we were supposed to be so terrible, if there was something dark, demonic in ourselves—out with it then! What was it? For God's sake, where was its energy? This was limbo. Who would not rather be in hell?

Bette Howland
W-3

When our language, ʻŌlelo Hawai'i, was outlawed, so our gods went, so prayers went, so ideas went, so the island went.
Kawai Strong Washburn

Sharks in the Time of Saviors

We can only forget, if first we agree to remember.

Marc Cerrudo
Far away means never again

PRESENT
2021

21/01/2021

One good thing about hospitals is the temperature control. I believe, these days, whether you are a summer person or a winter person depends entirely upon whether you have central heating or some other way of heating your home in winter. It is a question of class. People who say they prefer winter are all classists.

Winter makes me withdrawn. I become a ball of clothes and all I can do is roll from my bed to the kitchen and from the kitchen to the sofa. I'm a summer person; I'm sure that the few times in my life I have been happy, it was summer. Summer is like the week after your period: life is easier.

The fireplace in our home in Fumerol has always been one of my favourite parts of the house. Back then, having a fireplace wasn't just for rich people, nor was being able to buy a house in Fumerol. It's in the dining room and when my grandparents were still alive and came to visit, we'd use it to cook small fish or even cuttlefish, if my grandad brought some. I remember, when I stopped eating, cuttlefish with a bit of garlic-and-parsley sauce was the only thing I could get down;

everything else made me queasy. I loved watching the logs burn, as close up as I could, so close that my eyes and face lit up and I glowed red. I'd have gone inside it if I could.

When my dad left, my mum didn't have the energy to collect firewood, so the fireplace gradually rotted away, which means my mum turned it into a kind of spiritual display. She called it her *energy altar* or *sacred space*, depending on the day, and placed objects there that *brought positive energy to the house* or some nonsense like that.

My mum and dad built that fireplace from the abandoned bricks of an old factory. And as they still had bricks leftover, they used them in the garden. My mum always said, *every inch of this house has been touched by your dad's hands or mine*. I suppose she doesn't care about that now.

There is no fireplace here, but it is warm, perhaps even a bit too warm. Meanwhile, outside, it isn't just cold, today it is raining and the sky is yellowish, but a very artificial yellow, almost doctored. It is the colour of the sunset in cartoons and videogames, as if we were all inside cellophane.

As if cellophane were wrapped around the whole hospital, covering all the windows, and we had to live forever inside wrapping paper. Like a chocolate. Or maybe I'm the one who's all tied up. I'm a mummy who can't

move for layers of cellophane that start on my skin and take up much more space than me in this room that could be any room. The yellow layers cover my eyes, mouth and nose and make waves when I breathe. They make everything blurry and squeeze, shackle, strangle me.

I'm writing this, but I'm actually standing up, in the middle of the room, all of which is my gleaming yellow sarcophagus.

23/01/2021

Yesterday, Lluc came to see me, but he seemed distant. More so than usual, because we had already grown apart before I was admitted. Or had we? It's always the same, and then afterwards I never know which comes first: the breakup or the admission. I suppose sometimes it's the one and sometimes the other, but it doesn't matter, the cause is always the same. Me. My malaise.

The fear of ending up alone has accompanied me for as long as I can remember. Lately, however, this fear isn't so much a fear as a constant, concrete feeling: I always have the feeling that I'm all alone, even when I'm not, because I'm certain that at any moment I will be again.

In any case, this certainty is calming, but at the same time it prompts a new question, or brings me back the same old question: will I be like this until I die? Maybe that's what I'm looking for when I look for the vein in my neck: an answer. I still haven't found it; dying is harder than it seems. Where the hell is that vein? Why do I bleed out but not die?

It is easier to live as a dead woman than to die. And even so, the other day, Mariluz told me no one can

guarantee me that when I die I'll stop suffering. She's right. Now I can't even die in peace.

That is why I move like a leaf that weighs like lead. I would like to know how to be alive, but I have a weakness of spirit. I don't choose it: I'm just a dead woman, who wants to die, tired of being dead.

It happened to me before with Andreu. When I told him what was wrong with me, he said *I love you the way you are, with all that is yours and everything there is in you, whether good or bad. I love everything you are*. Sure, whatever.

We had been together for about a year when I was admitted, nothing major, out again in a week, but when I'd been in for three days, a letter arrived from him saying he couldn't do this anymore. Bastard, with everything I'd put up with... Looking back, he did me a favour.

You can't say you love everything about somebody if you're not prepared to love what you don't know. These kinds of declarations of love make me suspicious, there is something about those moments that pushes me away. Yet to what extent is that projection, or might we even call it manipulation? To what extent am I the one who encourages someone to tire of me, anticipating that they will? It all comes back to: I'm the guilty one.

However, in everything we make up, there is a dose of reality. In the first few days, they do: people come to see me, they bring me flowers, paintings, canvases,

they send me messages and tell me things. They ask me how I am, hoping I've improved or have had a good day, wanting me to be the usual Emma. – the one they have always known. But in here I am almost always in a bad way and I never have anything to tell them, or rather, I never have anything to tell them that won't make them feel uncomfortable.

They go about their lives and believe I'll be out soon and everything will be the same. But soon they tire of hearing the same thing every day when I answer the phone, they tire of not knowing what else to say or how to console me, of feeling sorry for me and guilty for not wanting to look. My malaise makes them uncomfortable because for a few minutes it interrupts their perfectly normal day; they'd been having a nice time, a fucking great day, had been to dinner someplace, and then had tickets for some concert or other and, naturally, no one feels like jumping up and down after chatting to a crazy woman who tried to commit suicide. It's a fucking downer.

Or maybe they are worried because when I go into this cycle, I don't know how I do it, but it's always easier to contaminate others than get out of it. Like when I have cold hands and someone rubs them to warm them up but instead my hands cool theirs down. It might even be me who's thinking this, and that's why I stop calling them and sending messages. Perhaps they don't tire of me, they just forget.

It's not that I don't get it... Ultimately, I suppose love implies a certain responsibility and, therefore, an impotence when saving what we love is out of our hands. Does responsibility mean sacrifice? What good is loving one thing if you destroy another?

I understand them. So, when I'm here, I have no choice but to live in my memories. I remember the brief lives I've lived like chapters from a book of short stories or photographs from an experimental exhibition. Lives that come undone as if they had never existed and from which all that remains are the images I paint or write, to see if that way I believe them.

In my presents, the life I've lived serves for nothing but to remember it. In between the yoga class on Tuesday and crafts on Wednesday. Between lunch and dinner. Between a shower and group meditation. In all my downtime, which is a lot. I don't know if these moments are short, but they feel eternal. So, to avoid dying inside them, I remember.

30/01/2021

I have very few memories from when my grandparents were alive. They lived in one of the houses on the sea-front, where the promenade is now. Most of the sea-facing ones were lowly-built fishermen's houses that were falling apart. *This house will collapse from woe*, my mum once told them.

But I didn't mind all that; it was enough to know that I lived two streets down from my grandparents. Right in front, the port was full of fishing boats. On Sundays we'd often take a trip on the llaüt, I'd cast the line and sometimes lose it; I wasn't really fishing.

As I had a tendency to get seasick, I preferred fishing on land. As a young girl, I went with my grandad and his friends. First, we'd make a paste with flour, water and food colouring, then roll it into little balls and attach them to the hook for the fish to bite. I don't remember exactly what we put in them, I know I stuck my fingers in to knead the mixture, but it was really my dad, mum or grandparents who made them. We then put everything in a basket and went to Can Contrat to buy shrimp or worms for bait.

When I was older, I used to go to the small harbour with Nina, Marc and Marc's friends. We caught mullets, which is what there were most of, with a hook and line. There wasn't as much sand as there is now, it was rockier. We also caught yellow crabs; there were loads of them. That's forbidden now because they're in danger of extinction. There were also sea urchins and octopuses, octopuses everywhere.

I remember one evening, almost at dusk, I know it was getting dark because we were wearing headtorches, when we were on the rocks by the harbour, just chatting after fishing. We had two octopuses in our bucket and several large sewer rats came to take them from us. Marc was raging: *fuck's sake, I caught those!*

Later on, he and his friends did their underwater fishing qualifications so they could catch moray, the odd sea bass...and lots of small fish for frying. Then I went to Marratxí and lost touch with them.

However, before all that, I have images of my grandma sewing. She'd always done it, to earn an extra wage on top of grandad's. Embroidery, too. When she was older, she made things for herself and for us, but in her younger days she made trousers, sweaters and anything the company she worked for asked her to. Without ever being formally contracted, she did a lot of commissions for souvenir shops and companies: she polished brooches, crafted handheld mirrors... My mum told me all this.

I wish my grandma had taught me to embroider, but I suppose I never asked her, or maybe I was too little. Who knows: maybe she did teach me and I don't remember. Sometimes I think I'm incapable of learning anything, that I paint about things I don't know, I talk about things I don't understand, I read books I can't explain and which tell me things I'll never retain.

Who would have said that ten years later there would be people prepared to pay millions for that little house that was crumbling from woe. Compared to what it's worth today, let's say my mum sold it for peanuts. Peanuts that lasted the blink of an eye, but that even so were enough for the deposit on a chalet in Marratxí. Two for one: she avoided the headache of looking after my grandparents' house and at the same time it gave her the chance to get out of Fumerol.

Selling our house, on the other hand, what sense does it make now? Unless she can't stand being less than anyone or simply can't allow me to live there… She says she's a bit short and could really use the money. She says I should go live with her, that she looks after me better, and if I don't want to, then I should be consistent and learn to fend for myself. Then she goes and spends three thousand euros on a yoga retreat to perform that hallucinogenic toad ritual. But the crazy one, locked up in here, is me.

03/02/2021

Today a woman came to ask me if I wanted to go have a cigarette. I told her I wasn't allowed out and, anyway, I didn't smoke. I've learnt that in here it's better to pass through and not make friends. Here friendships either push you deeper into the well, or sooner or later they become a loss.

I've pushed the bed closer to the window so the sun reaches me, to see if I catch a little colour. My grandma used to tell me that her mother covered her skin in oil with lemon to tan herself. More than tanned, she must have fried.

08/02/2021

Lluc had his issues, but he didn't hesitate for a moment in taking me in when my mum said if I didn't leave, she'd call the police. *You can't spend your whole life squatting in your house, your mum will find the way to get you out.* It's also true that I didn't like Lluc's house much. But at least it wasn't my mum's.

Neither Lluc's nor my mum's house face the sea. Many of the clearest memories I have from childhood are in the sea or very near it. In summer I used to wake up very early, usually when I heard my dad go out the door to work, then jump out of bed and pester my mum: *Can I go to the beach?* Then I'd take my bucket, spade, net, crab boxes and goggles and hurry off. I didn't need anyone else. With my sea snails, crabs and sandcastles, I was happy. Although sometimes Marc and Nina came and we played together.

Their mum, Olivia, was one of the first foreigners in the neighbourhood. I'd say the second, because apart from her, in my visions from childhood there is only Sabrina, but I could be mistaken. I believe they arrived in that order because my mum and all the neighbours

baptised Sabrina *the foreigner*, while Olivia they called Olivia, presumably because *l'estrangera* was already taken. However it was, that didn't differentiate them much in the neighbourhood gossip: *the foreigner has shacked up with an outsider now...birds of a feather...No, and that Olivia arrived alone, too...well, not alone, with a cat!*

My dad was an outsider too, so I'm sure when we weren't around, they gossiped about us too. No one took it personally, though. It was their way of entertaining themselves: sitting in the street, knitting, embroidering, mending nets and gossiping. These days, I don't think you're allowed to take chairs out onto the pavement. Not ones from your house, anyway.

In fact, in those days and in that neighbourhood, it was unusual that my mum didn't have any siblings, so the neighbours used to say my grandad was sterile and, depending on the day, either my grandma had my mum with another man, or she was adopted, or my grandparents slept apart... I don't think it occurred to anyone that everything might have been the work of the Holy Spirit.

Now, there are very few people left who know how to mend fishing nets. Biel told me once: the esplanade where they dried the nets isn't used for that anymore, it's just another part of the promenade. I've humiliated myself on that esplanade. Nina, Marc and I used to ride our bikes there and feel like we were on motorbikes

because we went so fast. Everything possible happened to us.

Once, Marc crashed into a car. He thought it had knocked him down until we told him no, the car was parked. He was really hurt, they needed to give him stitches and, as he couldn't go up the stairs at school and there wasn't a lift or anything, they had to move his whole class to another room downstairs that was normally for the older students. The big kids picked on him for the whole year for that.

Another day, I didn't have time to brake and I skidded and fell into the sea, through a gap between the wall and the barriers that shut off part of the port. Marc and Nina cried out and luckily some fishermen nearby were able to get me out. Instead of going home, I went to Marc and Nina's house so my mum wouldn't tell me off and I made Olivia promise she wouldn't tell her anything.

I love her a lot, Olivia. Everyone from Fumerol has always loved her, because she has always loved the neighbourhood. Often, she was the one who looked after me when I went to the beach. My mum didn't worry, because there was always some neighbour or other to keep an eye on us. They took it in turns: *Barita, watch the kids, I'm going to turn the stove down…Antonia, I'll be right back, I've got the plumber round*.

Marc, Nina and I always used to go to a rocky area

between the beach and the port. We caught crabs, jellyfish and sea snails, we observed them and then put them back in the sea. We lay down on the rocks and recharged our childish energy, hand in hand, and one of us would say something silly and all three of us would laugh. In mid-August the water was smooth and silent.

Nowadays, when you say you live on the seafront everyone thinks you're rich. Because the sea isn't ours anymore, it no longer belongs to everyone: it belongs to anyone, and when things belong to anyone, they always belong to others.

10/02/2021

Today, in therapy, I told Mariluz that what I'm most scared of is the point of no return. I'm happy to realise I'm on the way down, but I'm terrified of reaching the very bottom. I know what I have to do, but I don't do it. There is a miniature Emma trapped inside my head. I see her lying down on my brain as if it were a sofa, swimming down my blood vessels and strolling along my nerves. It doesn't look like it, but she's looking for a way out. I just want to shout out to her: *girl, run away, get out of my head*.

Mariluz told me that I'm mixing up brain and mind. *Imagine your brain is an elephant and your mind is on top of the elephant, trying to control it. If anyone shoots near the elephant, what will it do? Run. And you're on top of the elephant telling it not to run, that they won't shoot it and to relax. But the elephant won't listen. Well, that's how your brain and your mind work. Your mind tells your brain it shouldn't react like that, but, Emma, there are so many unconscious behaviours, so many connections built over your whole life, that for as many tools as you have, at times like these it's like you have them all in front of you but you don't know how to use them.*

Next week we're starting EMDR. She'll ask me questions and meanwhile I'll have to look at her fingers which will be moving in front of me from one place to another. Apparently, eye movement makes connections between the right and left side of your brain, which means this can sometimes allow you to access forgotten memories.

When she explained it to me, I thought memories surely cannot be forgotten, hence why they're memories. She told me, *it's not that they're forgotten so much as the mind stores them, as if organising folders, and only brings them out when you ask for them. That's why you need to know how to ask for them*.

Return – Acrylic on canvas, 2021

The water is smooth and silent. I play dead and everything, the whole world, falls quiet. I know it's spinning because I know. I bob at first, but then I realise the feeling of dissolving into the see runs deeper: I'm not floating anymore. I'm at the bottom of the sea like an old statue. I'm inside the silence of the darkness that never brightens. In my ears, like a cork, there is only the weight of the water, that has allowed me to enter it and has adapted completely to my shape. It created a void in the shape of my body, right here below, and filled my brain with salt. My eyes are shut because I don't need to see here. I am like a foetus before birth. I exist and no more.

//l'eclèctica//

There are times when the past disappears even though we don't want it to. And others when it follows us around with a relentless stubbornness. Emma inhabits a present that is alien to her: her body, her house and the neighbourhood that saw her grow up... Everything is diluted into uncertain memories. But what really defines us: what we remember or the way we confront it?

With precise and remarkably lucid prose, *When I'm Older, I Want to be a House*, sketches an emotional map from childhood to adulthood, from the sea to hospitals, from the family to bodily desires, always returning to places that are both refuge and wound. Written in vibrant, uncompromising language, this novel is also a reflection on what it means to inhabit a place, a body, and your own story in a shared world.

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