

El vigilante del fiordo

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This collection of eight stories explores anxiety in many different shapes and forms. "Broken Bodies," the most powerful, is a story of the Atocha train station bombings in 2004. It is written as a round, in sections; the first section ends with the phrase "if I had lost my hand," and the second, which follows a different character on the same day, begins "The hand was the only thing sticking out from under the blanket." The story continues for ten sections written from the point of view of ten different characters. A father takes his little boy to the station to try to explain what happened on the day of the bombing. A taxi driver is charged with getting a wounded man, who is bleeding profusely over the back seat of his car, to the hospital in time to save his life. A family goes to the hospital to identify the body of their eldest son. Two girls who take the same train every morning and know each other only by sight are on the train that blows up; they both manage to escape, but one is haunted by not staying to assist the wounded when her fellow passenger doesn't reappear on the train for months. A survivor, whose life was saved by an immigrant worker who put a tourniquet on his leg and stayed with him till help arrived, is obsessed with finding the stranger who saved him. The marriage of a couple who has lost their son begins to disintegrate. A wounded man lying on the tracks tries to help a fellow passenger who is moaning for help but he has no sensation from the waist down; he can only hold her hand as her life ebbs away. A young man who lives in an apartment overlooking the station can view the destruction from his shattered bedroom window, but he is too frightened to go down and help the survivors. A young woman and man who are riding in the carriage with the bomber realize he has left his backpack behind on the train and agree to give it to the conductor when he passes to collect tickets. American and British readers, especially those in New York and London, will immediately relate to these slices of tragedy and triumph, beautifully written with just enough detail to be deeply affecting.

"The Fjord Watchman," the longest story in the book, is the poignant tale of Abelardo, a prison guard who was the target of an ETA mail bomb that exploded when his mother opened the package addressed to him. He cannot forgive himself for his unwitting role in her death, and he has been committed to an insane asylum, where he has bitten the attending doctor and been tied down to the bed. In his exchanges with the nurse who comes to give him his daily tranquilizing injections it becomes clear that Abelardo believes that he spends the winters in Norway, where he is a watchman charged with protecting the fjords from terrorist attacks. There, he lives in a shack where he writes long letters to his mother, begging her forgiveness and promising to avenge her death by capturing the terrorists before their next attack is successful.

A sense of foreboding dominates the other stories as well: in "Workday Martyr" a man on his way to attend a colleague's funeral is waylaid and robbed; in "Kids in Caps" a couple is on the lam, moving from city to city to hide from people who are out to get them; in "Crying Woman at Alonso Martinez" a man sees the same woman crying on the subway, day after day, and becomes obsessed with helping her.

"Too Tired to Speak" is the heartbreaking tale of a boy whose parents are divorced. He lives with his mother and dutifully vacations with his father every summer, though he finds these trips together painfully awkward. His father, a womanizing journalist, tries desperately to bond with his son, who finds his father so tiresome that he is literally too tired to speak with him after spending day after day together. They go on a camping trip to Portugal, but the father cannot stop womanizing. When he attempts to make out with the underage daughter of a Swedish couple whose campsite is next to theirs, he loses a few teeth along with respect of his son.

Perhaps my favorite story was "Nardos en la cadera," in which a doctor tries to get her recently widowed father to go on a date. She shows him a photo of a woman his age and, after much cajoling, finally convinces him to go, but he is determined to be frank with the old lady: he will tell her he is only there because of his relentless daughter. His date, however, has agreed to meet him only because she recognizes him from her youth; she has supplied a false name and it is not until their second date that she reveals to him her true identity, masked as it is by the passage of time. The story provides a little relief from the sense of foreboding that dominates the collection.

Aramburu's last collection of stories, *THE FISH OF BITTERNESS*, won numerous awards, including the award of the Royal Academy. He is a talented storyteller who has mastered the form; several of these stories might have appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine in terms of both quality and content. In addition to several collections, he has written five novels, including *Trumpeter of Utopia* which was made into a Spanish movie ("Under the Stars") in 2007, directed by Felix Viscarret. An accomplished writer now in his fifties, his work deserves a broader audience.

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