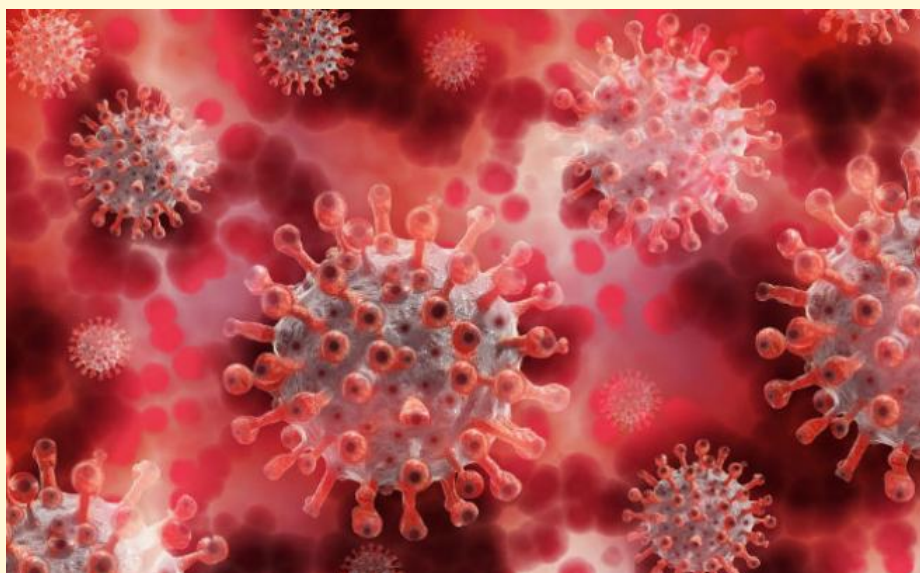




Basque Writing 21

Basque PEN members and the **Pandemic**



Propagation is what makes this pandemic different: it is not only the virus itself that has spread around the world, but information on it has also reached millions.

Since March, the concept detailed by sociologist Marshall McLuhan in his book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* has been ringing truer than ever, despite the fact that in that distant year of 1962 the Internet had not yet been invented (the first server was designed in 1983).

All the articles that we have collected for this issue were written in March and April 2020 and were previously published in the Basque newspaper **BERRIA**. In order to depict the anxiety and uncertainty of those early days, we have drawn upon the writing

In these times when our moods and outlooks change from one week to the next, it is extremely hard to say anything with a lasting purpose.

The purpose of the texts in this issue of Basque Writing is not offer long-lasting ideas, but to portray a specific moment in time. More than convictions, they are impressions, reflections forged by these unusual times. Reflections or desires. Isn't it hard to distinguish one from the other?

This isn't the first pandemic that humanity has faced. Previous centuries actually saw pandemics more fatal than this one. Nonetheless, this one is unique in many aspects. First, it promptly became a ubiquitous phenomenon, as it only took three months for it to spread around the world. Our resources to obtain and disseminate information are also more varied than ever. Even if technological infrastructures are unequal and vary by region, there are very few places in the world where it is absolutely impossible for someone to access the Internet.

of members of the Basque PEN and other writers with a connection to the Club. Eider Rodriguez skilfully reflects the confusion and hesitation we experienced in those days with a question posited by her son: "Will I be alive when the future comes? And will I be young when it gets here?"

Afflicted by the virus, Lutxo Egia spent almost a month isolated in his room, only communicating with the loved ones on the other side of the door by telephone.

Itxaro Borda distilled several fragments in her text by suspending loose beams in the shape of a Hurricane Diary. Finally, Karlos Lizanazasoro's poem focuses on the passage of time and juxtaposes the finiteness of the moment with the infinity of eternity.



Laura Mintegi
Basque PEN



Jump!

Eider Rodriguez

Look out your window: species of birds that you have never seen around here are getting closer and closer, rabbits have been seen in roundabouts, dolphins in harbours, and “the deer once only seen in deer crossing signs” are now strolling through parks. Let's be animals for a second: let's feel the fear we cause, the world we've created. Now, look inside the window: what are we, what have we become, what do we want to be, what are we willing to give, to what extent are we ready to leave our lives in the hands of governments and their bulls?

“Will I be alive when the future comes?” asked my son in both fear and amazement after having watched several dystopian films and series including *Black Mirror*, *The 100*, *Terminator*, *The Walking Dead*, *Mad Max*, *Matrix*, *Children of Men*, *Blade Runner* and *Contagion*. When I answered yes, he asked “And will I be young when the future gets here?”; I was at loss for how to respond. Now, I finally have an answer: the dystopia is here, and we are quite alive and under the impression that we are young.

We were educated to embrace Eduardo Galeano's words: “Utopia lies at the horizon. When I draw nearer by two steps, it retreats two steps. If I proceed ten steps forward, it swiftly slips ten steps ahead. No matter how far I go, I can never reach it. What, then, is the purpose of utopia? It is to cause us to advance”. We truly believed in that premise, and we did not care that utopia was a synonym for romantic fantasy, an unreachable concept, as it also encouraged us to carry out beautiful small acts from our smallness, utopia also being a source of fear and amazement. When I look at Galeano's quote, I realise that his words don't beat in my chest the same way they did in my youth; what's more, that they have withered down to a relic. Now the media plat-



forms produce the content created by publishing houses and filmmakers that once wanted to change the world. Thanks for the generosity, capitalism.

Before, we used to satisfy our need to know what was happening in our country and the world by combining coffee and newspapers; today, we check our email and social media accounts to see if something, anything has happened to our individual selves, holding a cup of tea, setting the world aside. The songs that we used to sing along until our throats were sore, the poems and books that were once our inspiration have gone out of fashion just like flared trousers and fringe. They've gone out of fashion not only aesthetically, but also when it comes to content, and we only revive them when we are in the grip of nostalgia, plastered by wine and friends. Those old dreams have become shameful to us, and, to the contrary, this paralysing postapocalypse, the height of coolness.

The future is here, and it has left Galeano's words behind, in the past; however, utopia, as well as dystopia, are more reachable than ever and there is something we should never forget: dystopia can be revolutionary and utopia alienating. The only thing that matters in the end is the purpose we assign to each one and what we perpetuate through them: fear or passion, totalitarianism or organisation, self-salvation or care, narcissism or a community that gives us a place to be our very selves, distance or corporeality, loneliness or togetherness, virtuality or earth, reality or imagination, in short, death or life.



Fredric Jameson, an author who has written extensively on ideology and fiction, says that capitalism is the true dystopia. Now that the system has its foot off the accelerator, we have an opportunity to discern whether that statement is true or false (as I'm writing this I am seeing how the number of people dead and countries with infections are on the rise, while also stumbling upon adverts offering free shipping on a new shoe collection).

For the first time in our lives we are all experiencing the same situation at the same time, not just women, or poor people, or black people, or homosexuals, but all of us. Look inside your window: we have got used to living as if there were no tomorrow, we apply an individualistic short-term outlook in which community organising is needless. Nonetheless, thanks to the magic of stillness, in these geometric solitudes, we have also thought about the other. We have thought about children, teenagers, the elderly, and all the superwomen/man that are in between, farmers, ranchers, strikers, hyperactive people, psychotic people, neurotic people, abused women and children, alcoholics, artists, supermarket workers, health workers, caretakers, prisoners, bus drivers, the homeless, migrants, refugees, compulsive gamblers, factory workers, telecommuters, journalists, those who have been furloughed, the unemployed, those who don't have a computer and the dead as well. We have finally started to absorb what we already knew: we are vulnerable, and when we are alone, we are lost.

When all this is over, our world and freedom will be more precarious, but we will promptly forget about it, especially those of us who were lucky enough to keep our jobs. Many of us will go back to work, and the birds, deer, dolphins and rabbits will have to go back to secrecy. Some of us will be able to afford a small or big holiday; others will have to focus on recovering what they have lost. Meanwhile, we are feeling the urge to get out onto our balconies to pay homage, to shout or bark, to sing, to play bingo with our neighbours, to look further away; however, we should not forget that, even though they are embellished with geraniums, balconies are still walled.

The future is here and we are as vulnerable as we are alive. We know that capitalism is the biggest matryoshka doll and that before we can get to the biggest one outside, there are a number of smaller dolls that we will have to decapitate. So let's choose to be birds, rabbits or deer while we have the chance to choose what to be, and when all this is over, let's once and for all be brave and jump into the life that we desire. If we already had enough reasons to do so before the pandemic, we will certainly have plenty after.

BIO-BIBLIO

(Erretereria-Gipuzkoa, 1977). Rodriguez has published two essays: *Itsasoa da bide bakarra* (Utriusque Vasconiae, 2014) and *Idazleen gorputzak* (Susa, 2019), and is most widely known for her short stories. Her first story collection was *Eta handik gutxira gaur* (Susa, 2004), and after that, she published *Haragia* (Susa, 2007), *Katu jendea* (Elkar, 2010) —which received the Igartza award — and *Bihotz handiegia* (Susa, 2017).



Photo by Lander Garro



Vampires and Palyndromes

Lutxo Egia

At the end of March, you read a quote that David Fernandez, who included it in an article published in the Basque magazine *Argia*, and Philippe Lançon borrowed from the philosopher Pascal:

"All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone". That 17th century room obviously lacked Wi-Fi. Lançon includes it in a fascinating book called *Le Lambeau*, in the chapter entitled "Geometry of a Room". As it is well known, two bullets shot from a Kalashnikov-357 Magnum disfigured the journalist's jaw during the attack on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. Lançon spent nine excruciating months in several rooms of two Parisian hospitals: Salpetriere and Les Invalides.

Rooms. Harkaitz Cano (a Basque writer) is an interior designer, even more so in your delirium. Your room's distribution is similar to the one in which Arakis is killed in his novel *Fakirraren ahotsa* (The Voice of the Fakir). You have two nightstands, one on each side of your bed; both bedside tables are identical, and on top of each of them there is a small lamp, a portrait and a book. Opposite the bed, there is a white wooden sliding French door, similar to the ones in hospital corridors. Up to now you hadn't noticed that marvellous symmetry, and the fact of not having noticed makes you nervous. The aim of symmetries is basically achieving aesthetic democracy, in fact, in the long short history of *Sapiens*, humans have always had asymmetrical symmetries imposed on them, especially since political leaders were invented. The symmetry of your room is not (nor is Cano's) as oppressive as that of a palindrome, but it is certainly annoying.

And, maybe because of that, you do not feel the room is entirely yours. If you have not understood that important aesthetic law thus far, then it's probably not entirely yours. In any case, it has suddenly



become your cell, playground, agora and map. You have spent three weeks inside it. You have been told that COVID-19 has, most probably, embraced you fiercely; they have estimated that probability to be eighty-nine percent. These days you feel more secure in uncertainty, in swinging realities. The first week was extremely harsh. Before all this, you were convinced that the words delirium and nightmare had been fabricated by the Cambridge Dictionary, but, suddenly, they showed up in your mind at night and slid down to your lips in the morning. Just as medals have their shine, you have your delirium and nightmares. Every night, a three-carriage train comes for you, it is the Train of the Dead.

The train is in your room for the first time. It is not hard to explain. In 1908, they started to bury the deceased outside Bilbao. *Si tibi terra levis*. It was in 1870 that everything started to change in Bilbao, and it was not until 1910 that the transformation was complete. The city's population quadrupled. So did the number of dead people. They started to bury the dead in Derio, which is 8 km away from Bilbao. The engineer Mariano del Corral created the Train of the Dead. It had three carriages, the first one was extremely luxurious, it was decorated with carved wood and polished glass. It could only transport one coffin and it had a chic lounge for the relatives; the second one could transport two coffins and had two small booths for the next of kin; the third carriage could transport ten coffins, but had no seats for bereaved.



Until the beginning of the Civil War, the Train used to set off from Unamuno Square, which is just outside your flat. However, these last few days, it has set off from your imperfectly symmetric room, time after time, time after time, regrettably overbooked. In his book *Espèces d'espaces*, in a chapter called "Bedroom", George Perec posits that the bedroom, as a space, is enough to bring the most insignificant reflections and the most inevitable memories. You could add delirium and nightmares to that list. Apart from Netflix and Twitter, you have also opened a thinking area and a memory area in your room, as well as the old train station. Until yesterday you had not realised how many things fit in a dead-end room. In fact, the doctor explained that it would become distended. Well, truth be told, they told you that the Basque health service would only provide you with telephone support, and considering that you were forced to carry out a pagan Lent, you should either turn to a priest or convert your room into a tourist accommodation. You opted in favour of the latter: you have transformed your room into a B&B, but those initials do not stand for Bed & Breakfast, but for Bakartua & Bazkatua (Isolated & Fed), and before you realise it, you are under the effects of Hamster Syndrome. Not only have you got accustomed to the disconcerting symmetry of the room, but you have also started to like it: five steps to and fro on your zonal strolls; the strangers on the balconies are becoming familiar, and your family, strangers; in the morning you steal A. B.'s identity, and at night, B. A.'s (Siamese dreams)... And without realising it, you have become a cornershop-vampire, sucking the blood of those around you 24/7, mostly during your night-time insomnia, and you feel so comfortable this way...

You feel cosy on your private island. The neighbourhood has also somehow entered your room, even though you've been told to be careful, not to trust the new neighbourrooms. They say that some of your neighbours will mutate before the virus does, and you think of the following excerpt from Gaël Faye's beautiful novel *Small Country*: "I can't recall exactly when it was that we decided it was no longer enough to share the little we had and that instead we would stop trusting, that we would see other people as a threat and erect an invisible barrier against the outside world by transforming our neighbourhood into a fortress and our street into a sealed-off area." And if you didn't know that he was talking about Hutus and Tutsis, you would bet he was referring to the warning you have just re-

ceived. A neighbourhood where the blurred has become neat, where the hidden has emerged to the surface. Who knows. Probably. Nevertheless, from your window, the neighbourhood (Bilbao's old town) looks more neighbourhoody than ever: cable television has finally been installed, a wide solidarity net has been created, more and more people care about local shops... The neighbourhood can be felt in every room.

And now that you are finally leaving the alleged virus behind, you are reflecting on the roomification of the neighbourhood. And Pascal is your companion during that reflection, because once in a while you've got to think about life. You open a bottle of tonic hoping the quinine will inspire you. The carpet is blue. I could have sworn that it was red before. Pascal has suggested that you ask for an extension of your isolation period and use it to repaint the entire flat. Pascal. Thinking. That children's song comes to your mind: Feel, Think, Act!

BIO-BIBLIO

(Santander-Spain, 1968). Egia is the author of a number of works, including poetry *Kalezuloko animalien itzalak* (Pamiela, 1999); novels: *Paperezko hegazkinak* (Susa, 2002), *Ezker hanka falta zuen* (Susa, 2005), *Zubigilea* (Susa, 2007); and short stories: *Txakur ingelesak* (Susa, 2011). He has also created two pieces of performance art: *Bi-lingual: Transitoak* in 2015, and *Haren da nire* in 2017.



Photo by Marisol Ramirez



Hurricane Diary - fragments

Itxaro Borda

They have come for the first infected person I know personally, or so I think. He is an elderly man I used to run into at work. I remember him stooped over a cane, always approaching me with his mouth brimming with words. I think to myself while staring at the blue lights of the ambulance and the nurses dressed in cosmonaut suits that I deserve scorn. That is when the terrifying proximity of COVID-19 hit me. That coronavirus rapidly moved from bats to snakes, to finally find a pleasant nest in human lungs. Darkness has taken over me.

I remember having dinner with my family at Christmas and again on New Year's Day, how we exchanged jokes with a side of cheese and champagne. China felt far away back then. We accused the famous 24-hour news "speakologists" and "editocrats" of fearmongering, of taking pleasure in sowing the cruellest hypotheses. We had been taking to the streets to protest the pension reform, and we had reproached Macron's government for using the virus as an excuse to call off talks in Parliament with paragraph 49-3 of the constitution. When the first patients were infected and died in mid-February, we were as sceptical as the Minister of Health. The situation soon got worse in Northern Italy, Germany and Spain. Journalists in Madrid identified Spain's patient zero: he was from Seville, a 62-year-old businessman who had been to Malaga. It truly touched me to learn patients' names and be able to imagine what they looked like.

We have never experienced anything like this before. Except for lovelorn, mourning and some literary difficulties, our lives had been quite serene since the Second World War. We trivialised epidemics like the avian flu and H5N1. The central government sent us little notes to get free vaccines, but we rejected these invitations. We believed the Government emanated



manipulation. We read too many science fiction books. But, apparently, everything is different with COVID-19: entire swathes of population are completely defenceless, especially the elderly, there aren't any masks, there is no hand sanitiser either, no money for mass testing.

At the beginning of March, when I travelled from Bilbao to Brussels and then from Paris to Bayonne, I observed in awe the abyss between the alarmism ignited on screens and the nonchalance of the passers-by in the cities. At the airport, very few people wore masks, and those that did were mostly East Asian. In some offices, you might find a bottle of hand sanitiser, but the rest couldn't care less: we still shook hands, gave out kisses and hugged each other tight. They decided to close the Louvre, only to re-open it three days later. They did the same with the Beaubourg to display the work of the great Pierre Soulage, an exhibit full of paintings that emanate brilliance beyond the blackness. Nevertheless, on trains and undergrounds anonymous voices threshed grains of safety advice: wash your hands, sneeze and cough into your elbow, use disposable tissues, practice social distancing with fellow passengers. Another question came to my mind while walking up the hill where Louise Michel's portrait can be seen, in Quincampoix street: if the epidemic was truly that bad, how were we supposed to tackle it with so few resources?



Doctors foresee a hurricane similar to the one in Italy. They don't say a word about the one in Spain. Macron talks on television and uses whistled words to encourage us, the elderly, to shelter in place and help one another. When problems arise, neoliberals always ask the citizenry to give the system a hand. In any other time, their only objective is to destroy public structures. Obviously, more funds will be allocated to companies than to public hospitals. Pure pornography. It is clear that common people are of no economic value. Imagine the government bailing out an energy company after a nuclear accident instead of reinforcing the health system to treat patients; that's how things work.

In the Southern Basque Country, the government decided to shut down schools three days ago. Museums. Bars and restaurants. For fifteen days. Events are being cancelled one by one: cultural, political and sporting events. The Northern Basque Country might take the same path. There aren't many infected people in Nouvelle-Aquitaine, but what has happened in China, Italy, Spain and even here has proved that cases can multiply overnight. We are not ready. Surprisingly, fear is the only emotion we can control. We saw the new French Minister of Health drawing black and red lines on sheets of paper, explaining how they intend to flatten the curve of infection so that hospitals, which are already facing a difficult situation, don't collapse completely. Magical speeches. Irrational speeches. These last few days, I can't get Marguerite Duras's *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* out of my mind: that mother who struggles, in vain, so that the sea won't drown her land. In Rithy Panh's film, it was Isabelle Huppert who embodied that mother.

Devastating news from Italy. My beloved Venice, Florence and Rome are deserted. Dante's marble statue rests motionless in front of the Basilica of Santa Croce. It is certainly not the time to go after Donatello's artwork. That sweet *Dolce Vita* feels a million miles away. A picture of a nurse from Lombardy is shared in social media. She is exhausted, sleeping, resting her brow on a computer keyboard. Sadness overwhelms me as I hear a doctor say that they have been forced to choose which patients will survive and which will not due to lack of space, lack of personnel, lack of medicine. French expert François Salachas calls those deceased patients the illegitimate, because if our Western European hospitals were properly funded, those people never would have died.

On the T1 bus, a woman who I know from the neighbourhood furiously tells me and the other passengers how a library worker had reprehended her because she, a 75 year old, was still leaving the house. Macron has suggested that the citizens above 70 should lock themselves in. "I have the right to leave my house if I want to. I am a human being!" she says over and over again, loud enough that everyone can hear her. After closing the schools, the authorities advised against leaving the children in the charge of their grandparents, as they could easily infect them. When will we be able to hold our sweet grandchildren in our arms again? Schools are not the only places that have experienced a change, our everyday lives flow with rigid scarcity in the shadow of the knowledge that we will soon be confined. When that time comes, we will only be allowed to leave our homes to buy food and medicine. And exercise. Provided we are sure to always carry our identity card and the proper forms in our pockets.

Ibon RG's synthesised music announces an impending clayey apocalypse in the same way that the pandemic, which overlapped with the Zaldibar tragedy, sabotages the stability of our everyday life. How long will it last? What can we do? The day after tomorrow we will be confined, and I will read Pascal or watch *Dead Man* again. I might react prudently and quietly. I might salute the sun. Or I might just get bored, the same as you...

BIO-BIBLIO

(Bayonne-Northern Basque Country, 1959). Borda has produced several works of different genres: poetry, *Bizitza nola badoan* (Maiatz, 1984); prose, *Basilika* (Susa, 1985), *Bizi nizano munduan* (Susa, 1996), *%100 basque* (Euskadi Saria 2002), *Susmaezinak* and *Kripton 85*; short stories, *Zeruetako erresuma*, and a play, *Odolak su gabe diraki*. She has also created the fictional detective Amaia Ezpeldoi.



Photo by Jagoba Manterola



Everything is forever

Karlos Linazasoro

Everything is forever
but I am not.
I have nothing but this moment,
and this moment doesn't fit inside me,
because I don't fit inside a leaf,
because a leaf doesn't fit inside eternity,
not even in a humbler measure.
This is the moment and I am here forever.
The rest of yesterdays and tomorrow's joys
are in the past and are naught,
they are but flowers, memories, soft pains.
They are naught, not forever,
but they fill my heart with time,
with the time that I have left till tomorrow,
so that I am everything that doesn't fit in-
side me,
another leaf and some more sky,
everything that is inside me,
birth and sin and woods,
the enormous incapacity I bear,
the uncurable fever that keeps me looking
back,
the immortal lights that I have extinguished.
This is the moment, I know that,
but this instant hasn't heard of me,
it can hear me but doesn't know me,
and it offers up time, a whole world,
that will be over in my lips last night,
as a short, sweet honey drop,
a whole world dying every moment.
This is all, I know that,
and because it is so scarce in its eternity,
I cannot endure at its core by myself,
because alone I am not
the forgetting and the remembrance
that time needs to be time.

BIO-BIBLIO

(Tolosa, Gipuzkoa, 1962). Linazasoro publishes new work almost every year. He has written more than ten books of poetry, the last being *Lurra bere erro gorria* (Balea Zuria), and also produced the short story collections *El-darnioak* (Erein, 1991), *Ez balego beste mundurik* (Alberdania, 2000), *Gizakiaren minak* (Erein, 2010) and *Trilogia hiperlaburra* (Elkar, 2016). He has also written a number of novels, including *Urperatze handia* (Elkar, 2009), *Udalbaltza bahituaren kasu pollita* (Elkar, 2011), *6012* (Erein, 2018), in addition to multiple essays.



Photo by Ander Gillenea