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ALMUDENA SÁNCHEZ
(https://shortstoryproject.com/writers/almudena-sanchez/)

WHY THIS STORY IS WORTH YOUR TIME

By D. P. Snyder, translator

Sickness is a central theme in Almudena Sánchez's work. Her characters are afflicted by mysterious ailments that are as spiritual and political as they are corporeal. In her semiautobiographical novel Fármaco (Random House 2021), she writes: "I needed

both to be sick and to have it confirmed that

I truly was... I wore a stamp on my hand. I was very happy to have that official proof that I am weak, extremely weak, feeble, frail, impaired, extremely fragile. I even laughed and Dr. Magnus shot me a suspicious look. 'You have depression,' he repeated." (Translation D. P. Snyder) Here, Sánchez's protagonist seeks official confirmation of her dis-ease and is overjoyed when she receives it, to the dismay of the authority figure. In the same way, the dis-ease suffered by the protagonist of Señora Smaig, (La acústica de los iglús, Caballo de Troya 2016) is only visible and interesting to animals and, of course, to herself. Her undefined illness confounds her family and the specialists who shut her into a sanatorium, enveloping her in a terrible (and telling) whiteness.

Reading Sánchez's work, it is impossible not to make the connection with Judith Butler's Sick Woman Theory, which insists that modes of political protest are internalized, experienced, and embodied in physical suffering and are, as a result, invisible. The sick person cannot march in the streets or carry a placard, but her physical dilemma is in itself a protest that unseen but nevertheless real. Living in a human body, for both Butler and Sánchez, is an inherently precarious and risky affair. The world—environmental degradation, violence, misogyny, racism, ableism, terrible medical

care, and other oppressive social systems—

sickens us and keeps us sick. Our sickness, in turn, invisibilizes and alienates us.

Sánchez's plucky characters, however, do not give up. They insist upon their lives and warn that something is not right. The locus of their protest is the private space of their ailing bodies, which they compel us to see and inhabit for the brief space of the story in order to make us understand that we, too, are vulnerable in a world that makes no sense.

by D. P. Snyder, translator (dpsnyder.us)

Translated by: D. P. Snyder

There's a theory, quite well-known but difficult to prove, about the psychic powers of animals. Of most animals. How they can sense magnetic fields, electrical fluctuations, pregnancies, divorces, how they predict full moons. How, breathless, transfixed, and bristling, they can stare at a white wall, white, where there's no sign of life, bewitched by an appallingly white wall.

One day I was jumping rope. I remember that much.

Time stands still when I jump rope. There's just a cord that appears and disappears like the ocean's waves. And I called out to my parents in between some of my jumps. I called out to them to say, to warn them, that something-was-not-working-right. One has to spell it out. In my body. A devastated area. An anomaly, a gene or bacteria. It wasn't clear yet. The markers, the matters of health and bad luck. And, above all, and with due regard:

how appalling it is to look up at the sky at night.

That was when animals began to interest me. And I, them. They stared at me for long stretches of time, the way one regards a dying fly. They had turned me into a person of interest hanging in the balance between life and death. A strange helicopter flying around without a propeller. They approached me to discern something as abstract and significant as a premature disease. They sniffed me with gusto, with pleasure, with fury. Anatomically. I was their new discovery. I was carrying some floating essence around in my body, an indefinable substance. Over time, I increased my understanding of the matter:

Animals, especially dogs and cats, have a sense of smell that is ten times more acute than that of people.

Most sentences were informational. The rest were fantastic stories or urban legends about extraordinary dogs and cats. The creatures that approached me, however, were common animals with extensive blemishes around their necks. What's certain is that a sickness—that flaming thing that keeps a body half-alive—allows no room for movement. I forgot words: what is the jugular? Now and again, you have to save up a little strength to jump rope, because time stops. It's a blunt assertion,

jump rope, because time stops. It's a blunt assertion. Although the theories that may interest one are almost always nearly impossible to prove.

All great stories have two versions: while I familiarized myself with animals, the psychological system, the atom's components and the tremors of storms, I was surrounded by appallingly white walls, in a white hospital, covered with white sheets. Death, my death, does not wear black. I, who have seen it at close range, can describe it: it is young and pale, like a broken sugar bowl.

I made a diagram with all the theories. With an IV needle stuck into it, the hand becomes robotic: it writes at top speed. Internal time is superior to external time. I wanted my thoughts to remain for posterity, that is if I had a right to any posterity. Posterity, I thought, must be like a faded tattoo in the brain.

And I was alone most of the time.

The things we do alone at home, in the hospital, in a mental hospital, are not so strange. On the contrary: they just seem strange. Because we are alone and we look at

ourselves in the mirror a lot, to see ourselves, to emphasize ourselves and to send ourselves a bodily message:

that we definitely still exist, alone and alive.

And we talk to ourselves and hug ourselves from behind in a rather tender (and somewhat desperate) way, as far as our arms can reach.

A mirror is an overly realistic confirmation of life. Once I read a well-known children's story: a woman had a talking mirror and it told her she was the most beautiful

talking mirror and it told her she was the most beautiful one of all. Not long after, the woman found herself transformed into a witch. And everything turned out badly and went wrong because of talking to a mirror.

If the mirror had not spoken, it would have been like all other mirrors: a mute object. The woman would have seen herself as an ordinary woman, with her hair all frowsy in the morning and nothing out of the ordinary would have happened. But then it wouldn't be a story and it wouldn't seem like real life, either.

I kept studying the theme of psychic powers and animal senses, and it ramped up during the several months they were injecting me with morphine, tranquilizers, and antibiotics within very white walls.

With so many injections and medicines, I forgot basic things, such as, for example: how to solve an equation, the difference between a green and a vegetable, the name of my Greek professor, or my brother Nico's laugh. However, I was assailed every hour with the idea that at that very moment an animal might be perceiving the rapid worsening of my sickness. I did not forget that. I felt understood by animals.

The days in the hospital passed. And the more they passed, the more I filled up with tubes. It was hard to figure out which tubes connected to which area of my body. I was tangled up in them, I had to disentangle myself, and there in that sterile landscape, I howled with pain. There's no echo in hospitals. Nevertheless, I always heard the footsteps of the sick walking down the hallways. Their footsteps marked the minutes. Three o'clock p.m. When they stopped walking, it was dinner time. And that's how life was in the hospital. Absence of stimuli.

Any movement hurt and opened a fresh wound.

Between operations, I would leave the hospital, like someone traveling for the first time to the Amazon. Somewhere between fear and fascination. For some reason, I never got better in that hospital. I yearned for them to let me leave and, when they did, I took full advantage of my liberty to take walks and go to the movies. They forced me to eat popcorn because I was so thin. And all the movies I saw were romantic comedies.

The time lost—between the crying and the anesthesia—was an apple that I kept biting into slowly until I got all the way down to the core.

My mother, who took care of me and looked after me in the hospital, made more friends there than she had in her whole life. She had always been a solitary woman. During the first days, the sick people's family members kept to themselves at different windows to allow themselves to be distracted by the breezes and colors in the garden. It was a reasonable attitude: cursing the world and holding back the tears. But, bit by bit, most of them started to assemble at the same window. They became like a band of the afflicted. They murmured. They shook hands. They fanned each other. They chewed gum in a synchronized fashion. They contorted with pain, with boredom, and then again with pain. They exchanged postcards from trips, happy moments under beach umbrellas. Look: twilight in Lanzarote. Marco's birthday in '87. All that, all together, in unison, and also a bit shy.

Of all the animals in the jungle, the elephant is the one with the most developed sense of smell. It has olfactory bulbs in the brain. That is why it comes equipped with a

bulbs in the brain. That is why it comes equipped with a fantastically long trunk, to snuffle up everything that passes by like a vacuum cleaner.

The elephant's intuition is humungous. As is its memory. Once I saw an African elephant faint. And the whole mountain shook. The rivers went off their courses. It was on its way to the elephant graveyard, to hide itself there among the decalcified bones and moist earth. It was going there to die. But on its way, it fainted and died on the other side. The worst things happen just like that when we are on our way to someplace and we never manage to arrive. That sensation of getting stuck in the attempt, of time paralysis, of long-term memory loss, and overly-large halls. The worst things in life happen in gerunds.

In most cases, death releases us with eyes open. Then we are left there with a petrified gaze, open to the world. We seek the last view of the sky, believing—often—that it will be the next-to-last thing we see. But for those people who shut their eyes (which are the rarest cases), they end up stuck there with one eye open and the other not. Or with both eyes half-closed. Or with a tic, flickering, which recalls the tremor of a butterfly's wings. One might say that a tic in a dead person is an inexcusable oversight. For that reason, there are professionals dedicated to closing the eyes of dead people. They have the right touch for the job. They boast very soft fingertips and palms which they hydrate with creams in the morning and which they exfoliate with sea salt in the afternoons. Short, perfectly clean nails. Accuracy and a steady pulse. One shouldn't use gloves: it's enough to have the gift of tenderness.

That's what happens with illnesses. You remember these things. And you begin to take a closer look at hands, at

things. And you begin to take a closer look at hands, at everybody's hands.

Biopsies and flowers travel through the hallways of hospitals. Analyses and stuffed animals. Glitter and scalpels. Defibrillators and stain-remover. X-rays and bonbons. Neither drama nor euphoria is prohibited. Visitors forget their umbrellas and get wet in the rain walking to the parking lot, something that heightens the seriousness of the matter. Occasionally, they also forget their scarves, their glasses, sometimes their transistor radios. The lost and found department is always up to its ears in stuff. So much dead stuff, every day more of it. On the edge of collapse. One day they found a cotton girdle that didn't belong to anybody.

Finally, and after many disturbances, a nurse told me that they were going to close down the department.

And they were going to close it forever. No joke. They reiterated it to us just in case we had left something behind in there. Something important. Departments close, life accelerates, the Atlas V rocket will continue its trip to Pluto, couples on Earth will break up and make up again. A man with a mustache will, at last, invent the best hair-growing device, and an actor from Wisconsin will be chosen to advertise it.

And I thought about that forgotten girdle. Who was about to lose it forever?

Almost no one returns to hospitals, although they are the future of almost everybody.

On one of my outings—still sick—I went to the zoo. When a dangerous disease takes up residence in your body, there are times when you don't really quite know what

there are times when you don't really quite know what your name is. The name. It's hard to say what it is. Perhaps because you've become a bit lost. You remember the sickness with all its accents, its consequences, its history, and its evolution. It takes up a lot of space in the person. It took up space in me. So, they called me borderline. I went in alone, recently operated on, walking slowly. I was still weak, with a scar that cut me in two. Scars walk, too, I mean, they go along with the people, they move. Before I walked one way, and now I walk another. I don't move standing up quite as straight. I lean forward slightly, a bit to the left. You have to adjust to the scar, always. And then you can go on living.

I wanted to know to what extent the animals could detect my disease.

The zoo was peaceful. The elephants were moving around in a skimpy twenty square meter space, and although I approached them cautiously, like another wounded animal so that they could sniff at me, they didn't pay much attention. The fauna went about its business backstage, eating fish and blackberries, grooming themselves, licking a rugged trunk almost dry

and stomping in mud holes. The dolphins leaped in their assigned box. Is there any leap sadder or more cheered than that of a dolphin?

Next to me was a tourist, smiling and homely, who was giving corn to the raccoons. Her name was Smaig. Señora Smaig. She had two bags full of corn. She was feeding the raccoons from one of them. And the raccoons were paying close attention to her. Attention tailor-made. To Señora Smaig. And with the other bag, she was filling up the empty holes in trees. The knotholes in the wood. Time's small erosions. She was fitting each kernel of corn

Anne's small crabbits. She was fitting each kernel of corn into them to the millimeter as if each kernel were predestined to occupy a specific place in each tree.

If trees breathed, they would have held their breath.

Señora Smaig gracefully masked the world's imperfections as they multiplied, played out and piled up. The trees split themselves in half bowing to her as she passed. Even so, Señora Smaig was persistent, and at any time of day, she could be found with a piece of corn between her fingers, looking for the perfect space to complete her dilapidated puzzle and finish it someday, with her aromatic, yellow-stained hands. Occasionally, when she felt like going undercover, she would look for trees outside the premises—paper maché trees—and she nailed corn between their branches. Although Señora Smaig made tremendous efforts in her labors, there were always rowdy kids who would find the leftover bits of corn stuck to the tree like some kind of organic Band-Aid and eat them, varnish and all.

I, on the other hand, was standing, lost in thought, looking at the decorative cages, the solidity of the bamboo, the plastic palm trees that lit up the night. The

refreshment stand, jammed with coconuts. Piña colada or almond milk ices. Baseball caps or goose feathers. Prints of tigers or foam rubber pistols. The world is full of choices no matter where you go. Telephone booths, of course, also contribute to world chaos: they have a folding door, the time on a screen, and buttons that sound like a major harmonic scale. What more do you want? One day this planet will no longer be able to bear its own weight. And it will collapse, punch drunk.

After several failures and without having confirmed my theory (were the animals no longer interested in me?), I

theory (were the animals no longer interested in me?), I decided to continue my walk through the zoo and visit the monkeys, which look like human beings and are amiable, amusing and animals closely-related to us. And they greet one, hide, and clear their throats. And they shiver from the cold.

I could say that my time in the hospital was the most sociable time of my life. Never had people visited me so much, every ten minutes somebody pounding on the door and begging my pardon for their impatience. Yes, I was in the habit of receiving visitors without having anything to offer them. A listless face and muffled hello were my habitual gestures. And I began to distinguish between many types of white. Almost all the shades of white: snow white, marble white, dirty white and bone white. The same thing happens to the Eskimos who can distinguish more than thirty shades of white. These human abilities are learned over time, I'm sure. Under the appropriate circumstances, most importantly. Yes, well, all those colors of white oscillated in my eyes, like a winter sea, piloted through eggshells. The night was so white—vampirical—that it was frightening to turn off the light,

because I thought that if you turned it off the whole world was going to scream out there, what you'd call a drawn-out scream, furious, one of those that turn the neighborhood upside down with their racket and squalor.

In the hospital, we have a broad view of our surroundings. As if the sickness, in essence, came equipped with binoculars. You can summarize your whole life: how many friends and how many family members you have. It's a simple mathematical equation, you don't have to be a professor to do it. You add or subtract. In reality, it's a hilarious and eerie situation.

subdued. In reality, it's a hilarious and eerie situation. Suddenly, they are all there. Waiting. Waiting for what? An avalanche of snow? The doctor's conclusion, or what the patient might say (especially when she is speechless) and has lost her memory there, between appallingly white walls.

At moments that are, shall we say, difficult and tragic, the family turns out to be larger than you had thought it was. The family is monumental. A gigantic army. A flock of haggard birds. They don't all fit in the room. They don't sleep because of you. They don't eat because of you. They don't yawn because of you. And, as an extra punishment, they don't all fit in the room. Even if they crowd close together and take up every last corner. They have to enter in shifts and the family becomes just one big thing, like an old-fashioned giant. I didn't know whether to thank them or to give them my condolences. I remember they smelled of wet roads and the neighborhood street lamps. I liked those smells. They stroked my head, they were left with a lock of hair in their hands, and they looked at me out of the corners of their eyes, because you shouldn't look too closely at sickness. You have to look at it normally. And things are

immediately ennobled, and vanity is a tree without a nest, and virtue is found in the happy medium. Who said that, anyway? The pre-Socratics?

My brother grew and grew. He got older and I didn't know how to position myself next to him. I couldn't put my arm around his shoulders to tell him: what terribly, profoundly white landscapes. He understood these phrases and many more. Bit by bit, he began to understand that hospitals are empty display cases. And try as hard as you like to play there, you never succeed.

He was becoming an expert in the art of non-communication.

My cousins had new loves. There in the hospital, I met their current husbands. And I greeted them with the best smile that a sick person has: a crooked one.

Ultimately, that was a good thing. Love had come into my room with the appallingly white walls. And I thought a lot about love. I had not loved yet. I had not done it. And perhaps I never would be able to. In philosophy and love.

Finally, Señora Smaig and I ended up walking around the zoo together. Very close together. Almost holding hands. There was no cage we had not inspected. As if walking around that animal facility were the last impulse of our lives. A little absent, a little mystical. Sometimes I had the impression that it really was the last thing that we were ever going to do. We had no energy left to do more. We continued, persevering, without eating, drinking, or swallowing saliva. And the two of us panted. The wild creatures penned up in the cells watched us uneasily. What sort of animals are these? The truth is, I didn't

know what was going on with her, with Señora Smaig, there behind her wide-brimmed hat. Maybe it was the death of her husband. Or of a child. Or maybe it was the loss of all her money. Or drink. Or all those simultaneously. And she didn't know what was happening to me, either, as I walked alongside her lopsidedly. We didn't want to know. It was comforting to stroll along that way, among confined animals, without saying a single word. Nevertheless, despite the perfection of the moment, I wish I'd had a lined notebook during that walk. I don't know why. A notebook for posterity. These

are the things you're apt to miss when a day goes off-schedule.

All afternoon, we ambled along. It seemed as if we were dragging a menhir behind us. Every ten minutes we stopped in front of a different cage. She stuffed the animals with corn (that made her feel lucky), and I stared at the tigers. Could they truly not sense that my body had been stricken, that it was a poisonous hive?

I got very close to the cages; a few centimeters closer than was allowed.

After a number of hours walking around, we managed to see the zoo several times in a row—four times, I seem to recall—snake after snake, buffalo after buffalo, and when they were about to close the place in the early evening hours and the tourists were applauding the last dolphin show, I realized that the biggest elephant in the whole zoo was starting to smell me. It stuck its trunk through some of the cage's bars and smelled me in a friendly way. Without being rude. Slowly and politely. Painlessly.

No miracle happened. The elephant, after an extremely thorough sniffing, returned to the back of its cage and dropped to the ground, completely exhausted. It was out of breath. As if it had snorted up kilos and kilos of tar. A deflated, gray mammal.

Right after that, the fireworks began. It was the last day of summer. The zoo was changing over to its new schedule—they wouldn't open the facility at night anymore—and we wouldn't have the opportunity to see the penguins beneath the stars. Until next year. Most goodbyes are either routine or melodramatic. However, I

goodbyes are either routine or melodramatic. However, I could not say goodbye to Señora Smaig, no way. We were as united as life and death, gazing up at the night sky that lit up and then went dark amidst smoky tremors. In fact, thanks to the bursts of light, I could see that the corn kernels left over in her bag had an ashen look, not very edible. It's just as well that fireworks are in themselves a kind of goodbye. There was no need to say anything else.

‹ (https://shortstoryproject.n/stories/crazy-over-william/)

ALMUDENA SÁNCHEZ
(https://shortstoryproject.com/writers/almudena-sanchez/)

Señora Smaig

14 min

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